

The State of Nature Connection in the UK

Wates Family ENTERPRISE TRUST

NCN

UNIVERSITY OF DERBY

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Executive Summary

This report describes the results of a survey exploring the state of the nature connection field in the UK, completed by 199 people who identified themselves as professionals working towards supporting more people to feel more connected with nature. The survey explored the activities undertaken to connect people with nature, perceptions of the state of nature connection, and visions for a more deeply nature-connected society. The report highlights five key messages:

1. Nature connection has become a distinct professional field

Nature connection is a cross-sector, multi-scale field. Respondents worked across the voluntary, community and social enterprise, private and public sectors, most commonly within environmental, education and health contexts. Connecting people with nature was a purpose and mission for many organisations, with priorities relatively balanced between nature and people. Work ranged from directly connecting people with nature to creating the conditions for more people to feel more deeply connected with nature.

There is also evidence of a culture of evidence-based practice within the field. One-third of respondents evaluate the impact of their work on people's nature connectedness, more than half use the Pathways to Nature Connection framework, most organisations work collaboratively with others, and most respondents are part of a network or community of practice. Together, these findings suggest an established and diverse field with shared frameworks, practices, networks and ways of working.

2. The field operates as an ecosystem

The dominance of mycelium as a metaphor reflects the essence of nature connection work. Practitioners often act as connectors, helping relationships, knowledge, resources and opportunities flow through the wider system. Like mycelial networks, much of this work remains largely unseen, despite its potential to have far-reaching influence.

The services and functions respondents identified as most needed for a more deeply nature-connected society closely mirrored those already being provided, suggesting a field that is developing in ways consistent with its own understanding of societal need.

3. The field is growing

Most respondents perceive increased nature connectedness amongst those they work with and society more broadly and are optimistic about human–nature relationships improving. Many report increased demand for services, citing wider recognition of the importance and benefits of nature connectedness, particularly within education and business. Increasing awareness, stronger evidence, growing demand and wider recognition of nature connection were all identified as shaping nature connection work.

Despite ongoing barriers, the overall picture is one of a growing field that is gaining visibility, confidence and influence.

4. The field underestimates public connection with nature

There is a widespread perception that most people in the UK have low nature connectedness. However, other research suggests most people score within the middle to upper range of nature connectedness measures. Respondents consistently estimated lower levels of nature connectedness amongst colleagues, others in their sector and the wider public than population data would suggest.

These findings suggest that nature connection professionals may underestimate the strength of existing nature connectedness amongst others, particularly within the general population, and may overestimate the degree to which their own relationship with nature differs from that of wider society.

5. The future lies in community, capacity and collaboration

Collaboration across organisations and sectors was identified as the most useful factor in supporting nature connection work. Respondents highlighted stronger partnerships, greater connection with other organisations, and more time and capacity as key enablers. The most frequently identified barriers were lack of funding and time, alongside limited awareness and understanding of nature connection within organisations and across society.

When asked how they would invest £10 million over two years, most respondents proposed projects focused on communities, education, children and young people, or health and wellbeing. Their ideas centred on growing capacity, raising awareness, improving coordination, strengthening networks and increasing opportunities for people to spend time with nature. Visions of a more deeply nature-connected society described changes in ways of being, everyday life, places, and systems, supporting stronger communities, greater collaboration, and nature connection embedded across education, health and wider society. Professionals demonstrate a clear understanding of nature connection as a societal issue requiring collective and systemic responses, rather than simply changes in individuals.

Background context

The human–nature relationship is increasingly recognised as a fundamental factor in both human and environmental wellbeing. Global assessments have highlighted the need for societal reconnection with nature, not only to support healthier and more resilient communities, but also to address biodiversity loss and wider environmental challenges. In this context, nature connectedness has emerged as an important focus for research, policy and practice.

Nature connection describes our relationship with the rest of nature: how we think about, feel towards, and interact with the more-than-human world. Nature connectedness refers to the strength of that relationship. People with stronger nature connectedness tend to see themselves as part of nature, experience greater appreciation and care for the natural world, and actively seek opportunities to engage with it. A substantial body of evidence shows that nature connectedness is associated with improved wellbeing, greater resilience, stronger social relationships and increased pro-environmental behaviour. Nature connection is therefore increasingly recognised as beneficial not only for individuals, but also for communities and the environment.

Over the past two decades, research and practice in nature connection have expanded considerably. Alongside advances in understanding how people develop relationships with nature, a growing community of organisations, practitioners, policymakers, researchers and businesses has emerged to support this work. However, there has been little attempt to understand the nature connection field itself: who is involved, how organisations collaborate, the challenges and opportunities they face, and their vision for the future.

The Nature Connectedness Network (NCN) was launched in 2022 by the University of Derby and Natural England to bring together those who share a desire to help people and organisations get closer to nature for the mutual wellbeing of people and planet. Its members represent a diverse range of sectors and organisations, including environmental NGOs, policymakers, social enterprises, charities, academics, businesses, health professionals and practitioners. The growth of the network reflects the increasing scale and diversity of the nature connection field, bringing together people working across sectors, disciplines and scales. More broadly, the network provides an indication of this growing community of professionals committed to nurturing nature connectedness, and the interest in opportunities for collaboration, sharing of knowledge and practice, and collective action within the field.

This report presents findings from a survey of professionals working in nature connection, within and beyond the NCN. It explores the activities undertaken to support nature connection, perceptions of the current state of the field, and visions for a more deeply nature-connected society. In doing so, it provides a snapshot of an emerging professional ecosystem working to strengthen relationships between people and the rest of nature across the UK. As participation was voluntary and largely recruited through professional networks, the findings should be viewed as a snapshot of those engaged with nature connection rather than a complete census of the field.

A Note on Terminology

The work of strengthening people's sense of connection with the rest of nature spans many sectors, disciplines and types of activity. Consequently, there is no single set of terms that fully capture the diversity of the work represented in this report. The following terms are used for convenience and consistency, while recognising they are imperfect and will not reflect how all individuals or organisations describe their work.

'Nature connection initiatives': Any project, policy, practice, intervention, creation of a space, research activity, campaign, art or other piece of work that aims to understand, promote, or deepen people's sense of connection with the wider natural world, or for which nature connection is a significant outcome.

'Nature connection professional': Any person whose work focuses on, supports, influences or seeks to improve people's connection with the rest of nature.

Nature connectedness: An individual's subjective sense of relationship or closeness with the wider natural world.

About the study

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the University of Derby College of Science and Engineering Research Ethics Committee. Invitations to take part in the research were shared by the researchers through professional networks and social media, and subsequently shared and promoted by others within a wide range of networks. The online survey sought to hear from professionals in the UK and internationally whose work aimed to support nature connectedness. This report focuses on responses from 199 respondents currently living and working primarily in the United Kingdom.

Chapter One | An ecosystem of nature connection professionals

This chapter explores the work being done by nature connection professionals.

Key Findings

- Nature connection is emerging as a distinct cross-sector field
- Most organisations balance people and nature priorities
- Mycelium, pollinators and trees dominate ecosystem metaphors, reflecting a focus on connection and interconnectedness
- Evaluation and collaboration are widespread
- Most professionals belong to a network or community of practice

Respondents represented all areas of the United Kingdom, with a **greater concentration in the South-West (24%),** followed by the South-East (10%), and the East Midlands (11%). London, North-West, and Yorkshire and the Humber each made up 9% of the respondents, with 5% East of England, Wales and Scotland, 2% North East and 1% Northern Ireland. This distribution reflects similar surveys showing a higher proportion of people working in the people-nature domain in the South of England.

Nature Connection Professionals worked across sectors, with 31% from private sector, 22% from public sector and 44% from the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector.

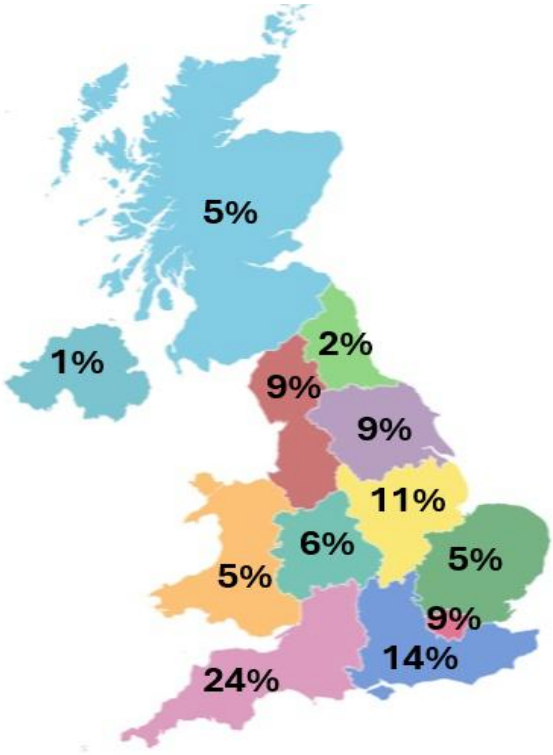


Figure 1. Regional distribution of survey respondents

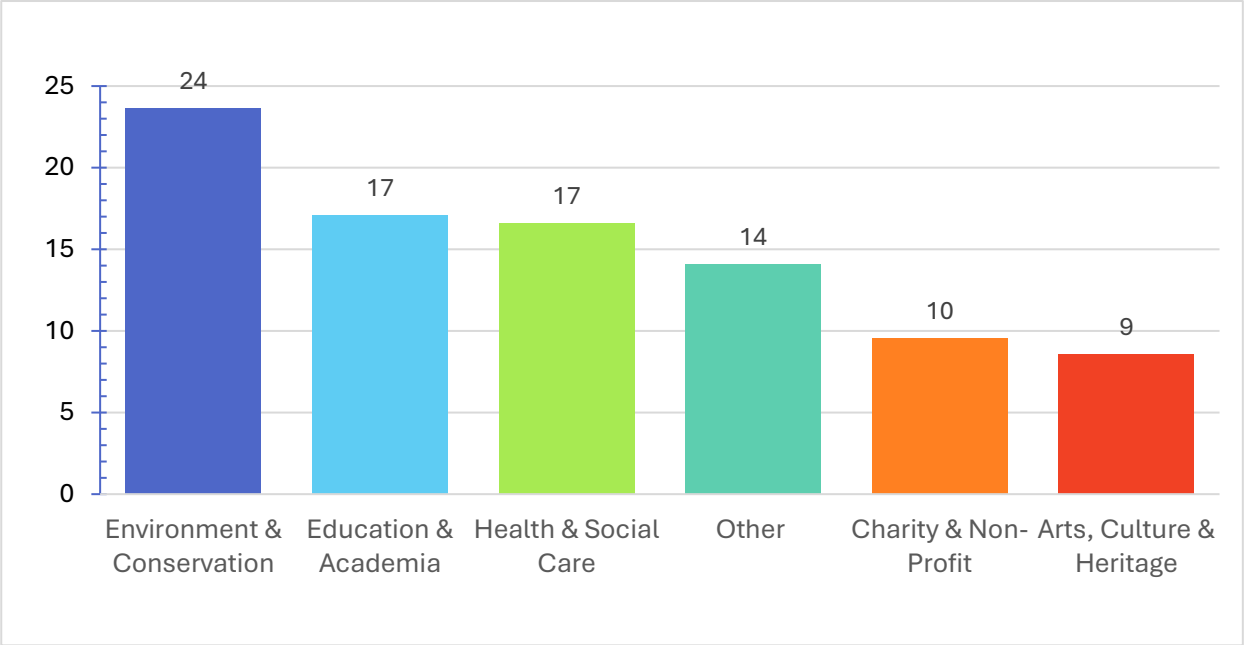


Figure 2 Sector distribution of survey respondents

A range of fields were also represented, with the **most responses from people in Environment and Conservation (24%), Education and Academia (17%), and Health and Social care (17%),** followed by Charity/Non-Profit (i.e. VCSE sector) at 10%, and Arts, Culture and Heritage making up 9% of the sample. Government and Public Services, and Business and Industry each made up 3% of the sample, while 1-2% worked in each of Urban Planning and Design, Agriculture and Food, Technology and Innovation, Media and Communications, and Finance and Insurance sectors. 14% (N=28) of the sample selected 'Other' sector, with many indicating involvement in Wellbeing/Ecotherapy related work, coaching, or working across multiple sectors.

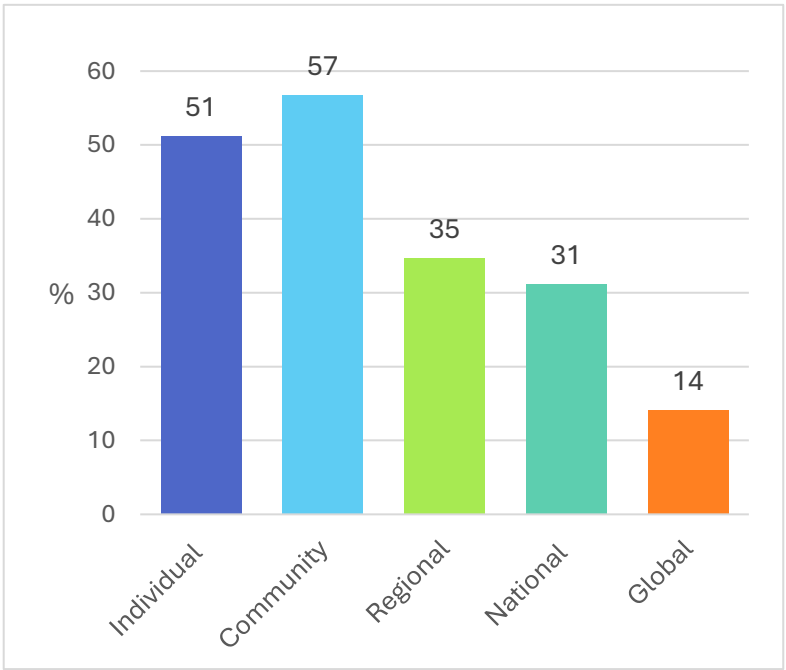


Figure 3. Scale of nature connection work

Respondents and their organisations operated at all scales - **most worked on a community scale (57%) and/or supported individual nature connection (51%).** Approximately a third each worked at regional (35%) or National/at scale level (31%), and 14% worked at a global level. Most organisations (45%) worked on just one of these scales, while 4% worked across all five scales.

Nature connection as organisational purpose and mission

Respondents were asked the extent to which connecting people with nature was a purpose and mission of their organisation, on a scale of 1 (not at all) to 10 (sole or main purpose). The mean score was 7.3 (SD=2.6) indicating that, on average, organisations reported a relatively strong focus on nature connection.

There were some differences between types of organisations, with Private and VCSE organisations reporting a significantly greater focus on nature connection than Public organisations, $F(2,188)=19.296$, $p<.001$, $n^2=.170$.

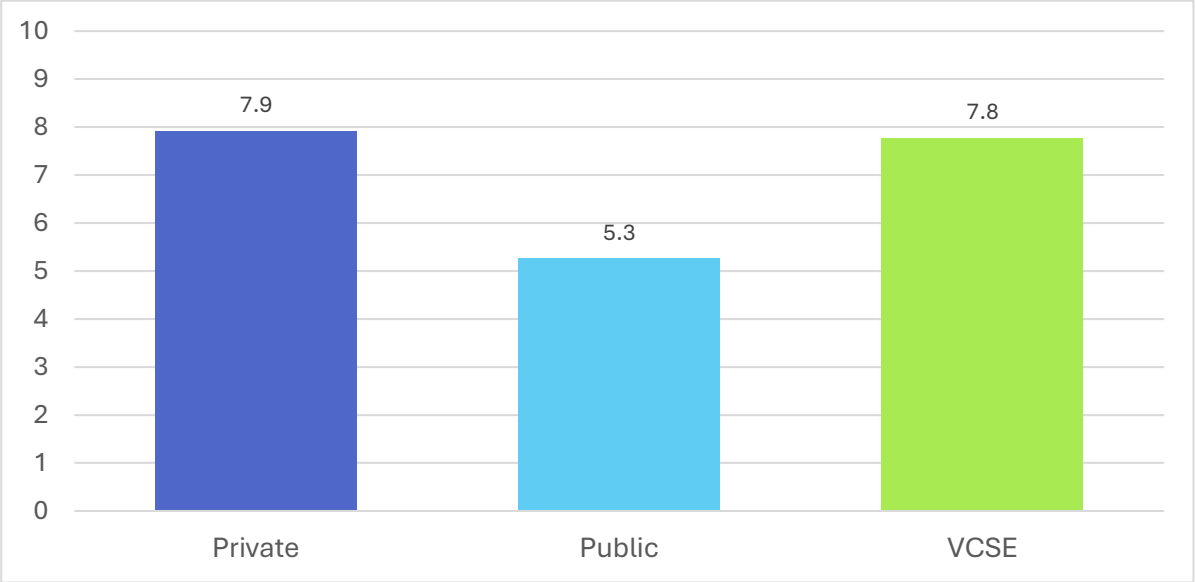


Figure 4 Extent to which nature connection is an organisational mission and purpose

Balanced people-nature priorities

To explore the balance between people and nature in the focus of work being done by organisations represented, participants were asked to move a slider between 1 (representing nature) and 100 (representing people).

The mean score was 57, with median of 50 indicating that, overall, most organisations were relatively balanced between people and nature. However, there was a lot of variation, and some sector differences, largely due to the greater focus on nature in the Environment and Conservation compared with the 'people' focus in Health, Education, Charity and 'Other' sector organisations, $F(12, 193)=3.989$, $p<.001$, $n^2=.209$.

Respondents were then asked where they would like their organisation's priorities to be. Just over 40% of people suggested no change, and the median remained at 50. However, there was a movement closer towards the middle from those who indicated current practice was more heavily weighted on nature or people. Broadly speaking, nature connection work appears to serve both people and nature.

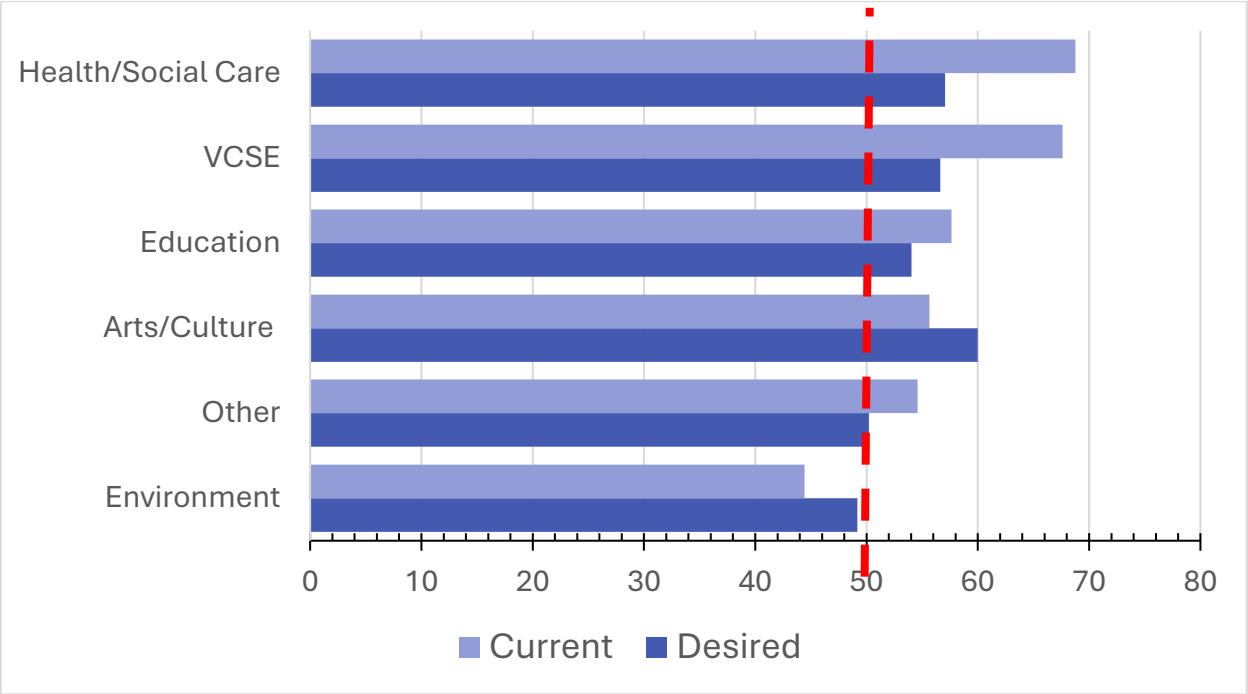


Figure 5 Perceived organisational priorities towards nature (0) and people (100). Note. Dashed line at 50 shows balanced priorities

The nature of nature connection work

Respondents were asked to describe the work they and/or their organisation do to connect people with nature. The range of responses reflected the various scales and contexts people worked within, and specific roles within their organisation.

Most described work that involved **directly connecting people with nature** through the design and delivery of activities, programmes and places that aim to help people feel closer to the natural world. Some work was focused on boosting **access** to green and blue spaces (i.e. getting people outside, supporting field trips). Some respondents were involved in **place-making** - creating spaces to support nature connection, including provision of woodlands or gardens, or applying biophilic design in workplaces and other spaces.

What does nature connection work involve?

- Connecting
- Place-making
- Stewarding
- Healing and supporting
- Enabling
- Researching
- Educating and training

A number of respondents described **nature stewarding** or recovery work that supported both people and the wider natural world. Others focused explicitly on psychological connection with nature (including use of the nature connection pathways, apps, mindfulness and meditation, forest bathing, arts and creativity). Many addressed both physical and psychological connection. Activities ranged in scale from leading nature connection walks, through to national organisations that have nature connection as organisational mission.

Overlapping with the work of connecting, was work focused on **healing and wellbeing**, ranging from community interventions aimed at addressing social isolation, green social prescribing, work within the NHS, therapeutic, coaching and counselling work.

Some can be considered **enablers** – those that facilitate and support other organisations and individuals to carry out their work, whether through funding; running networks, partnerships, and communities of practice. Within this group are those whose work aims to shape change in systems and institutions – for example, supporting the integration of nature connection into specific sectors (i.e. into healthcare). Some offered advice and consultancy and worked towards shaping policy.

Some responses highlighted the production and sharing of knowledge, including **research and evaluation** to generate the evidence base, and the translation of this evidence into accessible summaries to increase awareness and understanding amongst specific groups or the general public. Some were **educators**, offering training and development around nature connection, or environment and sustainability more broadly. This work often overlapped with a focus on **influence and communication**, including advocacy for nature connection. Some respondents identified their work as storytellers, using art, imagination, TV and film, music, social media, exhibitions and festivals to produce, share and invite stories of connection.

Across responses, there were indications of a cross-over between work on nature-community- and social-connectedness, growing **relationships with nature as well as with people and place**. Respondents also worked with a variety of groups – children and young people, parents, communities, patients, healthcare professionals, business and organisations, and policymakers.

Mapping the nature connection ecosystem

We asked respondents to *"Imagine the community of organisations working towards enhancing human-nature relationships as an ecosystem. What species/habitat/function would your organisation be?"*

There was a diverse range of responses, dominated by those identifying themselves and/or their organisation as doing the work of **mycelium**, followed by those working as **trees or woodland**, **bees and other pollinators**, **rivers** and other parts of the water cycle and system, and **soil or compos**t. This suggests a focus on the parts of the ecosystem that connect, spread, distribute, move – mycelium, pollinators and rivers, while trees and woodlands offer shelter and support, and soil and compost help create the conditions for nature connection work to happen. Some described their organisation as an ecosystem in its own right, with multiple functions. Amongst the mycelium, trees, pollinators, rivers and soil were ants, beavers, seeds, grass, pigs, grandmother whales and more.

Respondents were also asked what aspects of an ecosystem they felt society most needs for more people to feel more deeply connected with the rest of nature. The distribution of responses remained unchanged – suggesting the services and functions currently being provided by nature connection professionals is in line with what services and functions are needed.

The overall dominance of mycelium reflects the core work of most nature connection professionals – growing relationships, connecting people and organisations, and helping knowledge, resources, practices and opportunities move through the system. Like mycelial networks, much of this work is unseen yet can have enormous reach, forming a connective web that underpins the health and resilience of the sector and, more broadly, society.



Professional Practice

Over half (59%) of the respondents reported that they use the pathways to nature connection[1] in their work. The pathways to nature connection – senses, beauty, emotion, meaning and compassion – offer an evidence-based framework for the design and delivery of places, events, activities, and interventions to provide opportunities for people to feel more connected to the rest of nature. These results indicate considerable uptake across the field, however use of the pathways varied across sectors – ranging from 44% in educational institutions, and those working in 'other' sectors, through to 80% in VCSE organisations and 77% in arts, culture and heritage. The pathways were used by 69% of those working in health and social care and 67% of those in environmental organisations. These differences were statistically significant (X^2 (5, N=175) =14.04, p=.015).

More than two-thirds of the sample (70%) evaluated the impact of their nature connection work to some extent, with only 16% saying they did not. 11% selected 'other' in their response and, of these, just over half indicated they are working towards evaluation in the future or wanted help and guidance to do this. There were no significant differences across organisation type or sector.

Around 30% of respondents evaluated the impact of their work on nature connectedness, using a mix of standardised scales (e.g. Inclusion of Nature in Self, NCI) and qualitative approaches. A few people reported not being aware that formal nature connection scales existed. Others reported they had used a scale bit did not find it appropriate in their work.

[1] Lumber, R., Richardson, M., & Sheffield, D. (2017). Beyond knowing nature: Contact, emotion, compassion, meaning, and beauty are pathways to nature connection. *PloS one*, *12*(5), e0177186.

These findings suggest a strong culture of evaluation across the organisations that took part in the survey. While fewer than half included specific nature connectedness measures, it is not clear if this is linked to the nature of the programmes and initiatives evaluated, or issues related to practice, suitability, or understanding.

Collaboration

In terms of past or current collaborations, **over half of respondents indicated that they were actively collaborating with other organisations in other regions**, with 26% saying it was integral to how they work, and 27% saying they collaborate 'quite a lot'. Just over a third collaborated with other organisations 'a little' or 'somewhat', and **only 13% reported they did not collaborate at all**.

There was **much less international collaboration**, with 46% of respondents saying they didn't collaborate with organisations in other countries at all, and a further 19% only a little. Around one-fifth were involved in international collaborations quite a lot (12%) or as an integral part of how they worked (9%).

The majority of respondents (58%) reported being part of a network, community of practice, research group or similar that focuses specifically on nature connection or human-nature relationships. A broad range of groups were identified, and many reported being members of several groups. As well as some general networks (e.g. the Nature Connectedness Network in the UK), many were focused on nature and health/wellbeing, professional practice such as forest school, therapeutic horticulture, and coaching/leadership.

More broadly, respondents were asked to describe the ways in which they collaborate with others as part of their work. Beyond working together on **collaborative projects**, **sharing knowledge and practice** were the primary forms of collaboration identified. Respondent comments on the sector they had the most overlap and collaboration with showed the most frequently identified were health social care, and wellbeing (22%), education (19%), and environmental/conservation organisations (16%). The sectors most frequently identified as those respondents want more collaboration with were health and social care (including mental health and wellbeing) (19%) and education (12%). There was least collaboration with commercial and business sectors.

Chapter 2 | Perceptions of the state of nature connection in the UK

This chapter explores nature connection professionals' perceptions and perspectives on the state of nature connection in the UK, and on what is needed for nature connection work to flourish.

Key Findings

- Most respondents perceive nature connectedness to be increasing
- Nature connection professionals are generally optimistic about the future
- Respondents underestimate public nature connectedness
- Collaboration and connection are considered more useful than information or space
- Funding, time and limited awareness of the widespread relevance of nature connection are barriers

Positive changes and optimism

Overall, **most respondents (74%) said they think that levels of nature connectedness are increasing**, while 17% said they think they are decreasing. There **was more optimism (64%) than pessimism (25%)** about human-nature relationships indicating a sense that things are getting better and will continue to do so. This is reflected in people's on-the-ground perceptions of change – when asked if they were seeing increased nature connectedness in the people, organisations or areas they work in, 70% reported yes, and 11% said a little.

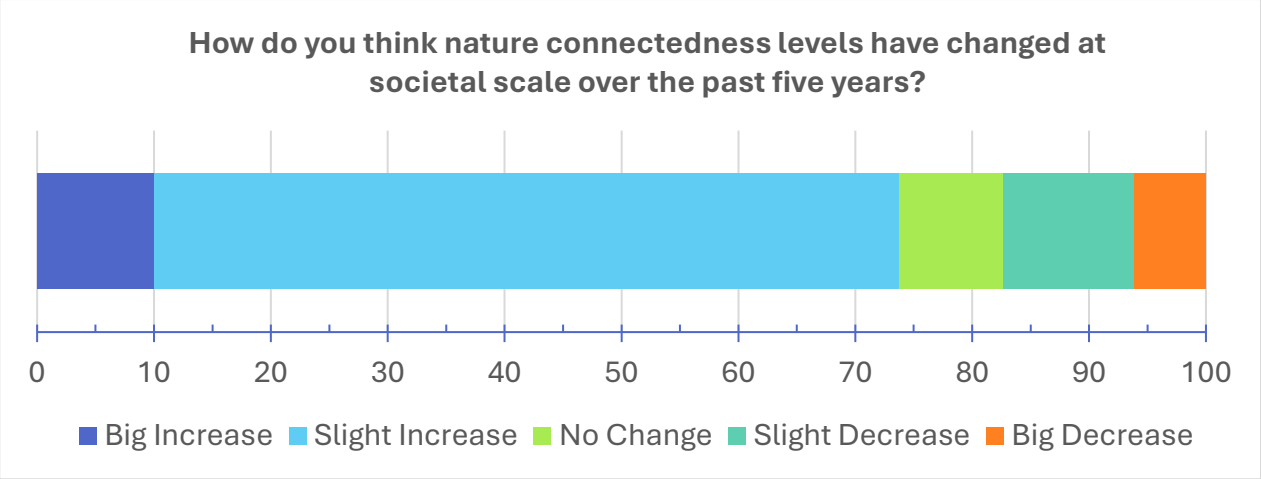


Figure 6. Perceived changes in societal nature connectedness

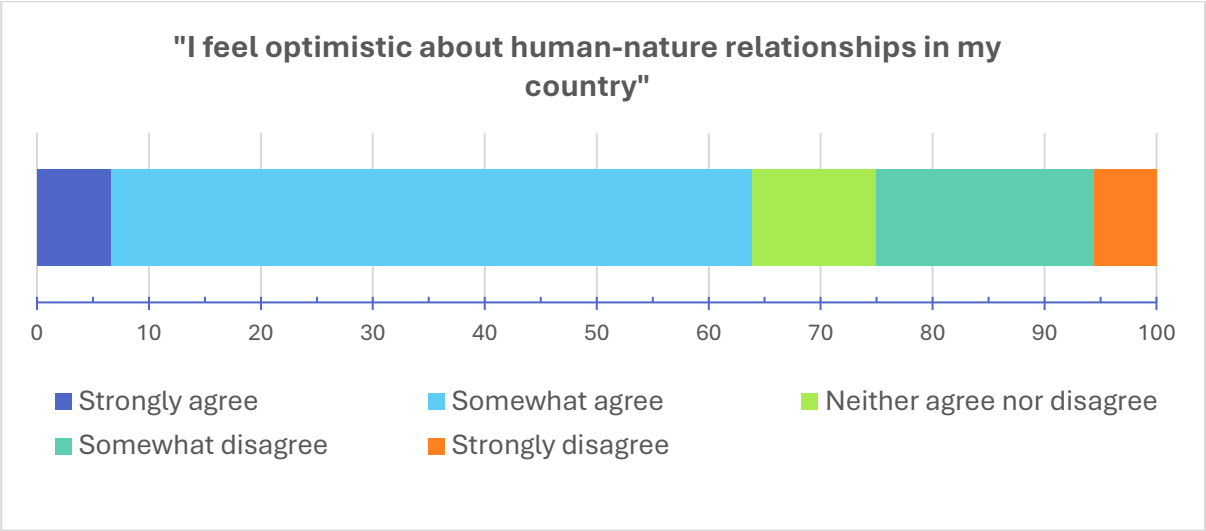


Figure 7. Optimism about quality of human-nature relationships amongst nature connection professionals

Estimating the nature connectedness of colleagues, professionals, and the UK population

While most were optimistic about nature connectedness levels improving, **respondents tended to estimate the nature connectedness of others as being less than their own**. In doing so, they **substantially underestimated the average level of nature connectedness amongst 'most people' in their country** and likely underestimated the strength of nature connection felt by their colleagues and others in their sector.

Nature connectedness was measured using the Inclusion of Nature in Self scale[2] - a single-item visual scale in which people select the set of circles that best represent their sense of relationship with nature – from two circles beside each other (1) to two overlapping circles (7). Participants were asked to indicate their own sense of nature connectedness, and then estimate the nature connectedness of their colleagues, most people in their sector, and most people living in their country.

The mean nature connectedness score of respondents was 5.5, while they estimated colleagues to average around 4.0 and others in their sector 3.4. There were some differences across sectors, with those in the health sector estimating lower levels of nature connectedness amongst their colleagues (M=3.2) and wider sector (M=2.7), than the estimates of those in the environment sector of their colleagues (M=4.6) and wider sector (4.1), $F(5, 175)=3.676$, $p=.003$, $n^2=.095$; $F(5, 175)=3.479$, $p=.005$, $n^2=.090$.

There were small positive **correlations between personal and perceived nature connectedness levels** – the higher a person's own levels of nature connectedness, the higher the estimated level of nature connectedness amongst colleagues ($r=.302$, $p<.001$) and others in sector ($r=.196$, $p<.001$).

[2] Schultz, P. W. (2002). Inclusion with nature: The psychology of human-nature relations. In *Psychology of sustainable development* (pp. 61-78). Boston, MA: Springer US.

The difference between respondents' own nature connectedness and others was most marked in estimations of nature connectedness amongst 'most people' in the UK. A strong **majority estimated very low levels of nature connectedness amongst the public - the average score was 2.1, with 20% estimating public scores of 1 and 59% estimated it to be 2.**

These findings suggest **many respondents are underestimating the strength of other people's nature connectedness – particularly amongst the general population.** A recent survey of over 2000 people in England, with a demographic profile broadly reflective of the national population found a mean score of 4.8, with only 5% of the sample rating their nature connectedness as 1 or 2[3]. This is a vastly different picture than the one painted by nature connection professionals' estimates. This may reflect a tendency to understand nature connectedness as binary – something people 'have' or do not have, rather than a continuum along which people vary. While we know average levels of nature connectedness are lower in the UK than most other countries, being relatively 'lower' is not necessarily the same as being 'low' in absolute terms. The wider data suggests that the nature connectedness 'gap' between nature connection professionals and the general public is not nearly as wide as may be assumed by those working in the field. Figure 8 below illustrates the differences between perceived and actual nature connectedness of UK public, compared with professionals' mean scores. Figure 9 shows the distribution of scores of professionals and a public sample[4].

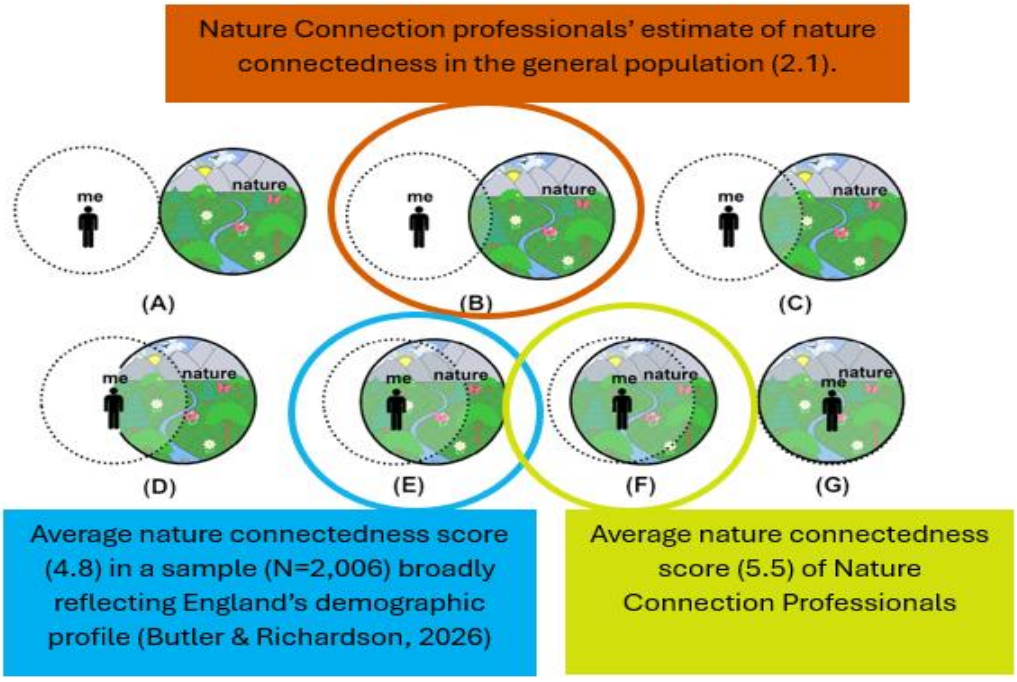


Figure 8: Illustration of perceived (orange) versus population estimates (blue) of public nature connectedness, and professionals' mean nature connectedness scores.

[3] Butler, C.W., & Richardson, M. (2026). A sense of belonging in protected landscapes: Report for the Protected Landscapes Partnership. University of Derby

[4] As above

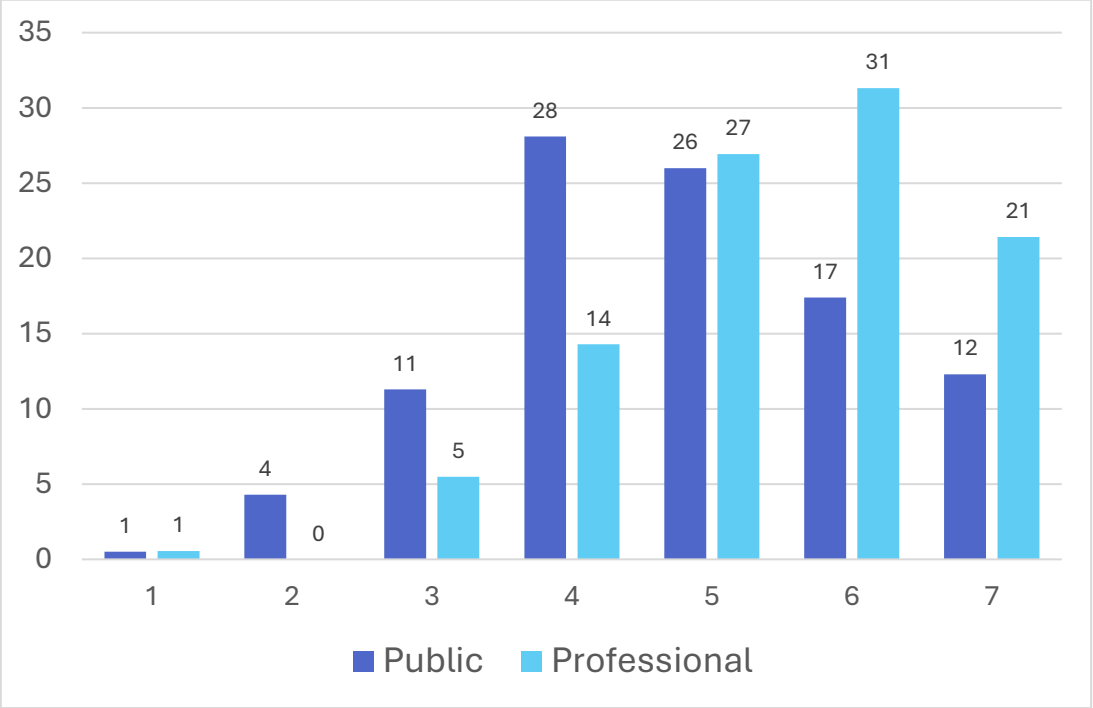


Figure 9. Distribution of Nature Connectedness scores of public sample and NC professionals

Organisational and sector opportunities for facilitating nature connection work

We explored what nature connection professionals identified as the factors that support or limit their work connecting more people more deeply with the rest of nature. Overall, **all elements were considered to be at least slightly useful.** There was **most agreement about the value of more cross-sector collaboration**, followed by **greater connection** with other organisations and **'more time'**. There was more support for inspiration (60%) than for information (47%).

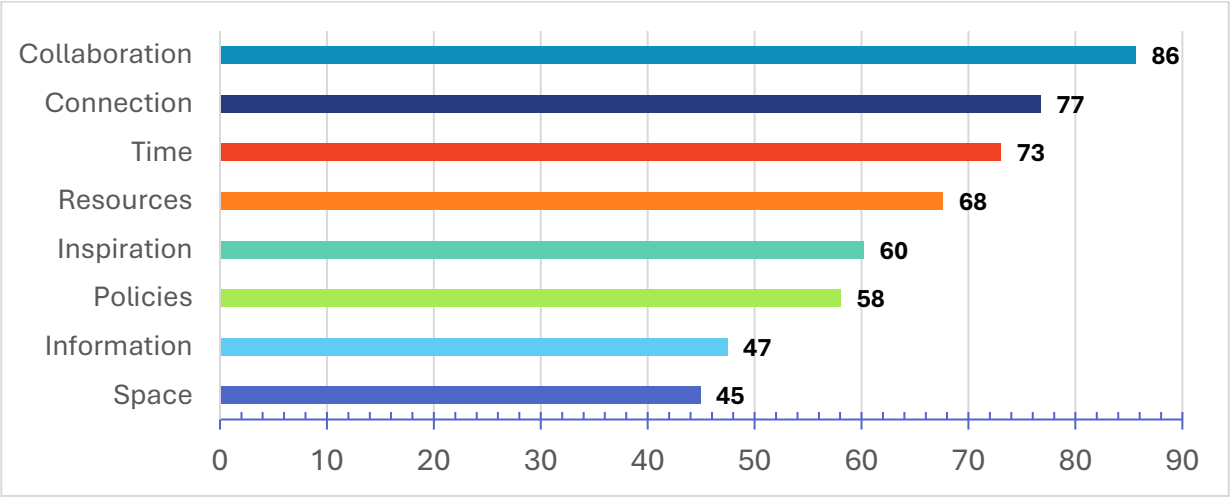


Figure 10. Percentage of respondents agreeing each element would help their organisation connect more people more deeply with nature

"Nature connection should be woven through everything we do rather than being treated as a separate agenda."

Respondents were invited to describe the main opportunities they would like their organisation to explore to improve nature connectedness. Reflecting the quantitative data, the most frequent response related to greater **collaborations and partnerships**. This was followed by a cluster of responses relating to **internal organisational development**, which included greater awareness of nature connection within an organisation, staff training, and greater integration and embedding of nature connection across different elements of an organisation's work. Another key theme was **broadening the individuals and communities** worked with, including ensuring **inclusive and accessible opportunities** and working with specific groups. Allocation of **internal funding** for nature connection related work was identified by some, with other themes including more **evidence and evaluation**, access to **space**, more **advocacy** and **promotion** of nature connection, and **embedding** more straight nature connection activities into work with communities.

> "The growing recognition that human wellbeing depends on the wellbeing of the natural world creates enormous opportunities for change."
>
> "Senior leadership buy in, commitment and focus"

Collaboration and partnership were identified as the main opportunity respondents would like the sector to explore to improve nature connectedness. There were also a number of comments focusing on the value of **additional evidence** about nature connection benefits and about raising **awareness of this evidence**. Many identified the opportunity to **embed nature connection into the health and education systems** as key, while some focused on embedding nature connection into policy. More broadly, some identified the opportunity to shape both understanding and practice through wider recognition of the potential of nature connection to be embedded in **all policies and sectors, and the inseparability of human and environmental wellbeing**.

> *"Securing more funding for this type of work, to explore cross-collaborations with the healthcare system, working on engaging with our general communities (rather than specific community groups)"*
>
> *"Focus on scale, not individual/personal improvements. And at pace. Sustainable, long- term changes (asset based) rather than deficit/project funding dependent (...) A whole systems approach to nature connection being benefit driven at scale, not output focused."*
>
> *"Embedding the values of NC within all departments, including the more commercial parts of our organisation. Staff training for our team to improve understanding of what is meant by Nature Connection. Improving the diversity of people we are reaching."*

Barriers to connecting more people, more deeply, with nature

"We're all just scrabbling to survive and retain jobs right now, so there is little scope to explore what are seen as the 'nice to haves'."

Funding and lack of **time** were the most frequently identified barriers that respondents' organisations face in connecting more people, more deeply, with nature. Other barriers reflected limited **understanding** about and support for nature connection within an organisation or the wider **policies and systems** people worked within. Similar responses were provided when respondents were asked what barriers they thought their wider sector faced – however, there was a greater focus on wider **societal and cultural barriers**, including attitudes towards nature and nature connection.

Key societal and cultural barriers related to mindsets that do not recognise the importance of closer human-nature relationships, and perceptions of nature connection as a nice extra but not a priority. Responses identified societal nature disconnection, apathy and ambivalence, and a focus on growth and profit as barriers to the work, along with views of nature-based work as 'alternative' or 'hippy nonsense'. Several noted that pressures such as a cost of living results in a focus on surviving rather than thriving.

> *"Attitudes from senior managers/decisionmakers in potential client organisations who see this work as "a bit woo-woo""*
>
> *"People's disconnection to nature - so many reasons for this. Cost of living and health inequalities massive issues as competing priorities for people."*
>
> *"It's so far down the priority list because of the scale and complexity of the funding crisis. "*
>
> *"Tackle inner sector critics - show old school environmentalists that people DO belong in nature - get everyone on our side and make it a part of EVERYONE's job"*

Barriers to doing nature connection work

- Funding and resources
- Time and capacity
- Access to natural spaces
- Lack of awareness and understanding of nature connection
- Organisational culture and lack of support
- Policies and systemic issues
- Engaging with communities and groups
- Societal and cultural barriers

Trends and changes in the nature connection field

While a number of respondents identified a lack of understanding and awareness of nature connectedness within their organisation and society more generally as a barrier to nature connection work, conversely many identified increased awareness and understanding as shaping the work they did.

When asked what trends or changes shape their work, many identified **increased demand** from general public, clients, employers and others for opportunities to engage with nature in ways that support nature connection and boost wellbeing. For example, more teachers and schools actively seeking nature-based support for students, and more organisations wanting nature connection for workplace wellbeing.

> *"We are seeing more people showing an interest in wanting to connect with nature. it seems that people are more aware now of the benefits that nature can bring to them."*

Two key changes that were suggested as shaping this increased demand and interest in nature connection work were a) greater incidence of **poorer mental health** on a national scale, and amongst specific populations, and b) **greater recognition of the benefits of nature connection** for mental wellbeing. Some identified the increasing visibility of **nature and nature connection in media** as helping to boost public recognition, while the **growing body of research evidence** shaped the work of individual organisations, and was considered to support greater awareness and acceptability of nature connection.

Climate change, environmental crises, and the meta- or polycrisis, were identified by some as influential factors. The urgency of these crises was mentioned by some as highlighting the necessity for such work, and there was some indication of **greater awareness of the interconnectedness** of systems – for example, with stronger linkages between nature and climate/sustainability initiatives, or between human and more-than-human wellbeing (e.g. One Health, doughnut economy, inner development goals, regenerative approaches). Some identified the importance of 'deeper work' – such as exploring the historic roots of separation from the rest of nature or practicing in a relational way.

A number of structural and systemic issues were identified that both facilitated and limited nature connection work. For instance, **provision or lack of funding** was discussed by many. **Policy and legislation** were seen to limit work in some cases but enabling and benefitting work in others – from local policies and 'climate action plans' through to international policy documents like the IPBES reports. Organisational strategies, and a focus on diversity and inclusion were also identified as supporting factors.

Particular initiatives were also seen to support nature connection work, for example: forest school, National Education Nature Park, green social prescribing, green finance, neighbourhood health, social and therapeutic horticulture, and asset-based community development.

Successes and Inspiration

We asked people to identify any initiatives they admire or see as particularly impactful in terms of growing a more nature-connected society. Responses included both general types of initiatives, and specific named projects, organisations or approaches. The most frequently cited initiatives were those designed for children and young people, including forest school, National Education Nature Park, the Nature Premium campaign, and the work of organisations such as the Ernest Cook Trust. Respondents highlighted the work that supported children's engagement and connection with the wider natural world through learning, play, and growing.

Health and wellbeing initiatives were also frequently identified, with many respondents highlighting green social prescribing as particularly impactful, alongside organisations such as Natural Academy who train practitioners in ecotherapy and nature-based wellbeing approaches.

Respondents also highlighted the importance of **community focused** initiatives, particularly **community gardens and food growing**, and creation of nature-rich **community spaces**. These initiatives bring people together for social and nature connection, and in many cases collective stewardship. The work of Incredible Edible was offered as an example of an inspiring initiative, alongside the work of **grassroots** groups and individuals supporting local communities.

Alongside practical initiatives, respondents identified a range of enabling approaches. This included **policies and strategies** such as Nature Towns and Cities, and the Future Generations Act in Wales, and **research and evidence-based frameworks** such as the work of the University of Derby's Nature Connectedness Research Group, and Matteo Giusti's Be Nature framework. The **arts and media** were also identified as impactful in creating opportunities for people to engage and respond emotionally with the wider natural world, and a number of people identified **legal and governance** approaches such as Nature on the Board and the river rights groups around the UK as impactful.

The range of responses suggest respondents see impactful initiatives across multiple levels – from the creation of opportunities for direct engagement with nature through to community action, policy development, research, governance, and wider cultural change.

Chapter 3. Visions of a more deeply nature-connected society

This chapter explores what nature connection professionals envisage in a future where more people have a more deeply connected relationship with the rest of nature, and how they would make use of a large investment in nature connectedness.

Key Findings

Investment priorities focused on communities, education, and health
Respondents prioritise growing capacity, networks and hubs and embedding nature connection in community and institutions.
A more deeply nature-connected society is seen to involve changes in ways of being, everyday life, places, and systems.
Nature connection is understood as a societal issue rather than purely individual concern.

The £10 Million question

Respondents were asked what they would do if they or their organisation had £10 million to spend in two years, to connect as many people as possible more deeply with the rest of nature. Responses ranged from a few words to a five-point list, to richly descriptive paragraphs, with a variety of proposals working with multiple sectors and populations and approaches.



"We have become disconnected from nature, but we are also disconnected from each other - so something that supports communities to come together and connect to, and conserve nature, locally."

Community projects dominated – after 'nature' and 'people', 'community' was the most frequently used word across responses. Projects included the creation and use of community spaces – gardens, forests, urban parks – for people to enjoy and care for, often with activities and support for nurturing nature connectedness. These spaces would serve as hubs, and used for learning, for celebration and for healing, supporting education, health and community sectors. Responses emphasised community leadership of such projects, working with local grass-roots organisations and listening to what communities need.

Projects relating to **education, children and young people** were also common. Several respondents described the greening and wilding of school grounds, and embedding nature connection across all parts of a curriculum. The Nature Premium scheme was mentioned by some as a focus – ring-fenced funding to ensure every child has access to outdoor nature experiences. Others focused on teacher training – ensuring all teachers are aware of nature connection and how to bring it into teaching practice.

A third major theme of proposals was **health and wellbeing**. There were descriptions of integration of nature connection into the NHS, including by supporting the issuing of nature prescriptions from healthcare professionals, and growing Green Social Prescribing initiatives. Many described programmes and initiatives targeted at those experiencing mental health issues, loneliness and isolation, and various disadvantages.

Other less prevalent themes included projects focused on pure and applied **research**, public **arts** programmes, and **campaigns**.

Looking beyond the type of project proposed, we explored what function the funding would facilitate.

Building capacity. Training more people to support human-nature relationships and growing a network of 'nature connectors' across every region – people who know why nature connection matters and how to improve it. Many also described projects that would embed nature connection training into professional development – for example, ensuring all teachers, health workers and others understand nature connection. Green skills were also highlighted, supporting more people to know how to act as nature stewards and show others how to act in this capacity.

Awareness raising. Several respondents would spend the money on raising awareness of nature connection and its benefits for people and the rest of nature. This would be achieved through large-scale campaigns, social media, and traditional media formats (i.e. documentaries) to increase public awareness. Others focused on raising awareness amongst specific sectors, such as policy.

Connection and coordination. Funds would be used to help facilitate connections between organisations, and between communities, with creation of hubs and networks. Some would further distribute the funding, supporting a large number of smaller scale grassroots projects.

Access and infrastructure. The creation of urban green spaces was a priority for many, including community gardens and forests, representing a focus on increasing opportunities for people to engage with nature close to home, and making urban spaces

wilder. Transport was also highlighted in responses – using the funding to help people access natural spaces beyond their immediate area.

A number of responses indicated that they would spend the money to scale up what they currently did – indicating that people are already doing the work they consider important for a more deeply nature-connected society and would simply want to do more of it at larger scale to support more people.

"The aim wouldn't just be to get more people outdoors, but to help them feel restored, grounded, and part of something bigger, a relationship with nature that supports them long after the two years are done."

Visions of a more deeply nature-connected society

Respondents were asked to describe what a nature-connected society looks like to them. Collectively, these responses form a vision of a society that feels and lives closer with the rest of nature. The visions ranged in scope from a shift in sense of self, to ways of being in the world, through to systemic change in mindset, policies and practice.

We have organised responses into four broad categories which capture internal and psychological changes, lived practices, physical spaces and forms, and structures and systems.



Ways of Being

People have a strong sense of themselves as part of the rest of nature and not separate, with widespread recognition of the interconnectedness of all life. All nature as equal, with no hierarchies or speciesism, no sense of 'us' versus 'nature'. Relationships with the wider natural world are based on belonging, reciprocity, and responsibility.

People live their lives with more empathy, kindness, understanding, and generosity. There is a strong sense of community and collective action, with people living less isolated lives.

Everyone has a unique contribution to society. There is greater social justice, with values of a more equitable, egalitarian and inclusive world for both human and more-than-human species. People feel more empowered and agentic, with a sense of connection expressed through action and stewardship.

A sense of belonging and purpose is nurtured through a closer sense of connection with nature and the expressions of this connectedness in the changes in how communities, healthcare, education and everyday life function in this society. There is more hope, more creativity, and more long-term thinking, with imagination and embodiment celebrated. People are healthier and happier, with less stress or mental illness. There is wider recognition that one's own wellbeing is not separate from nature's wellbeing, and that harming nature is harming oneself.

There is widespread ecological literacy, with children learning about living with and as nature in schools. Intergenerational knowledge sharing, and practical skills are embedded in schools and communities. People 'know' the natural world, from identification of species, through to understanding food growth and systems. Nature matters more than consumption and 'things'. There is a sense of abundance and vibrancy, and no more scarcity mindset – people realise they have enough. They are more present, balanced, and more observant of the world around them, with a sense of care and reverence for the rest of nature.

Everyday Life

The pace of life is slower, quieter, simpler, more peaceful. People are more tuned into nature, with more noticing and appreciation of the natural world. The idea of 'nature connection' is normalised and simple – it is just a way of being and not just an intervention or programme, perhaps not even a term that is used anymore. 'Connecting with nature' is how lives are lived, side-by-side with the more than human – in schools, homes, communities, and at scale.

People spend more time outside, with less time spent indoors and less attention is given to phones and technology. Nature isn't something to 'visit,' but our home and companion, with people feeling a sense of collective responsibility of natural spaces. Our lives are infused and enmeshed with nature, rather than squeezing nature around the rest of life. Lives are lived in tune with the seasons, with seasonal food, celebrations and work rhythms.

There are community ceremonies, rituals and traditions rooted in nature, all of which help nurture community sense of belonging. Community and collective gardens and farms produce local seasonal food. There is less waste and little littering, with wider appreciation of the circularity of life shaping how people live and widespread care for natural spaces. People live as stewards of these spaces, with collective responsibility to care for them, and take actions to help and protect nature.

There are more jobs working with and for nature, and more volunteering opportunities – all motivated by care and reverence for the wider natural world. The nature sector is well-paid and a leading career path.

Places

Places are organised into bioregions, and there is a strong sense of belonging to place. The world is more wild, lush and green. Rural areas are more biodiverse; farms are havens for wildlife and cites are wooded and gardened. There are more forests, healthier rivers, and

natural spaces restored, regenerated and connected with each other. Ecosystems are more balanced.

There is a lot more shared space. Communities have natural spaces designed for people to come together for events and celebration. There are community gardens, community farms, nature-rich alleyways and edible trees everywhere, with many places for people to be with nature alone and together. Building and planning is done in a sustainable and nature-inclusive way.

Systems
All systems and policies reflect societal recognition that humans are part of nature and that human and ecological wellbeing go hand-in-hand. Social and ecological justice are prioritised, and nature's rights are enshrined in law, including recognition of ecocide as a crime. Nature is a part of all decisions and policies. Within business, nature is given a voice and recognised as an interest-holder and organisations integrate the natural world into strategies, working spaces and employee wellbeing, ensuring workers have time and space with nature.

Nature and nature connection are embedded in education and healthcare. Nature knowledge and practical skills, and living in symbiotic relationship with the natural world are part of the curriculum and school days. Learning takes place outside much more, with nature central to teaching of all subjects. Green social prescribing is mainstream, reflecting recognition of the healing power of nature, the wellbeing benefits of nature connectedness and relational engagement with nature, and the human need to feel a part of the rest of nature.

A care for nature is reflected in choices about energy, transport, planning and infrastructure, with approaches that respect, protect and regenerate the natural world the norm. There is less division between organisations working to support nature – they work together collectively, like an ecosystem.

Conclusions

This report provides a snapshot of a diverse and evolving nature connection field in the UK. While respondents work across different sectors, scales and settings, the findings reveal a shared commitment to strengthening relationships between people and the rest of nature. Taken together, they suggest a collaborative field that is growing in confidence, visibility and maturity, while continuing to face challenges relating to awareness, capacity and resources.

Nature connection is a distinct cross-sector field
While working across multiple sectors and scales, nature connection professionals share frameworks, practices, networks, and ways of working that suggests nature connection is becoming established as a field in its own right, with professional identity, knowledge base and culture of evidence-based practice.

The nature connection field operates as an ecosystem
Individuals and organisations perform complementary functions within a wider ecosystem of practice, acting as connectors, hosts, pollinators, flows and conditions that enable people, ideas, resources and opportunities to move through the system.

The field is growing, but barriers remain
Nature connection professionals report increased demand and wider recognition of the importance of nature connection, contributing to a sense of optimism for improved human-nature relationships. However, lack of awareness, funding, time and organisational capacity continue to limit the integration of nature connection within wider systems and institutions.

Nature connection professionals underestimate public nature connectedness
Most respondents perceived nature connectedness amongst the wider public to be substantially lower than population-level evidence suggests. This indicates a need to recognise and build upon existing relationships with nature rather than assuming people begin from a position of disconnection.

The future lies in community, capacity and collaboration
Respondents described change across ways of being, everyday life, places and systems, suggesting that nature connection is not viewed simply as an individual outcome but as part of a broader cultural and societal transition.

Taken together, these findings provide one of the first snapshots of the nature connection field itself, revealing a diverse, collaborative and increasingly mature ecosystem of practice working across sectors and scales.

Recommendations

The recommendations below are intended to support the continued development of the nature connection field and respond directly to the opportunities and challenges identified by respondents. While not exhaustive, they reflect recurring themes across the survey findings and participants' visions for a more nature-connected society.

Support collaboration and connection: Continue investing in networks, communities of practice, partnerships and knowledge exchange that strengthen professional practice and help the field develop collectively

Build capacity: Develop more community-based nature connectors and increase opportunities for training, professional development and leadership across regions and sectors.

Embed nature connection across sectors: Nature connection is not an additional 'nice-to-have' but can form a core part of the design and delivery of education and health and other sectors.

Shift perspectives: Move beyond a deficit model that assumes people are disconnected from nature. Create conditions for nature connectedness to flourish and build from the relationships with nature that people already have and recognise that nature connection is shaped by wider social and cultural contexts of everyday life.

Invest in communities: Support locally rooted initiatives that bring together connection with nature, connection with place, and connection with other people

Strengthen evidence-informed practice: Continue supporting evaluation, shared frameworks and accessible evidence that help organisations demonstrate impact and learn from one another.

Much of the work of nature connection professionals involves connecting people, organisations, knowledge and opportunities, creating the conditions for relationships with nature to grow and spread. Like mycelial networks, this work is often unseen, yet it may be one of the most important foundations for a more nature-connected society.