

HEALTH & NATURE MONTHLY NEWSLETTER

Natural England West Midlands

January 2026

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WELCOME TO THE JANUARY NEWSLETTER

Happy New Year! It's been a chilly month on and off but I hope you are having a good start to 2026! This time of year can feel quieter in nature, but there is still plenty happening if you know where to look. Keep an eye out for the native Midland Hawthorn hedgerows (pictured). Though unassuming, they play an important role in biodiversity, providing shelter and winter food for wildlife, even though it will not flower until spring.

Winter can be a challenging time for wildlife, but also for our own mental health and wellbeing, so it's especially important to try to get outside where possible, or to find simple ways to slow down and relax. As the evenings draw in quickly, finding time during the day can really help, but indoor nature connection activities can be just as valuable. Thrive's [Winter Wellbeing Calendar of Activities](#) has some great ideas to get you started.

There are also lots of lovely nature based events happening across the region. Take a look at pages 5, 7 and 8 to see what's on locally for you or your service users.

As always, I have compiled an external funding opportunities PDF suitable for wellbeing & nature projects.

YOUR NATURAL ENGLAND CONTACT

ABOUT ME

Hi, I'm Amber Marquand, the Health and Environment Lead in the West Midlands, focusing on Walsall and Birmingham.

Amber.Marquand@naturalengland.org.uk



WHAT I DO AND WHY

Nature plays a critical role in our physical and mental wellbeing, so Natural England want to ensure more people can access the healing properties of spending time in natural spaces. For example, via conservation volunteering, community gardening, tree planting, nature walks, green crafting etc.

Our Health and Environment roles across the country support and create connections between any Voluntary, Community, Faith and Social Enterprises, health practitioners, Community Wellbeing Roles, or local authorities interested in increasing the offer of Green / Blue Social Prescribing. We want to increase the offer of nature-based activities within communities to improve health and wellbeing and pro-environment behaviours, especially in areas with poorer health outcomes and lower access to nature.

I have created this newsletter as a way of providing support and information around nature for health and wellbeing in the West Midlands. For projects taking place in Walsall or Birmingham, I am able to provide tailored support so please get in touch.

SPOTLIGHTS

A snapshot of the amazing work being done in the West Midlands connecting people and nature.

Please let me know if you would like to feature in a spotlight in a future newsletter!



Herefordshire
Wildlife Trust

WILDPLAY THINKS DIFFERENTLY

Supporting SEN Children Through Nature

Earlier this year, Herefordshire Wildlife Trust piloted WildPlay Thinks Differently, a nature-based play programme designed specifically for children with special educational needs (SEN). Thanks to six months of initial funding from Herefordshire Council, the Trust was able to test a new approach: small-group, child-led sessions at Queenwood Country Park and Arboretum, giving children the space to explore, build confidence, and connect with others in a calm outdoor setting.

The response was remarkable. Parents told the team that mainstream extracurricular activities can be overwhelming or difficult to access for SEN children—but WildPlay felt different. One parent said, “*It’s really lovely for the children to have a group where others are perhaps similar to them... staff really understand that some children are a little different.*” Children echoed this sense of belonging, sharing how much they enjoyed “*making fires,*” “*climbing trees,*” and “*making things to bring home.*”

On the strength of this impact, the programme has now secured £17,815 from the National Lottery Community Fund to continue for another year. This funding will help WildPlay reach up to 30 children, offering opportunities to make friends, try new skills, and experience the proven wellbeing benefits of time spent in nature.

Julia Morton, Youth and Wellbeing Officer, says: “*We’re delighted. It means we can continue and grow our work with children with additional needs. Spending time in nature is proven to reduce stress and help regulate emotions, and our WildPlay team are experts at creating child-led, nature-based play experiences.*”

After 25 years of delivering free nature play across the county, WildPlay continues to show that access to the outdoors can be transformative—especially for children who need it most.



Learn more:
herefordshirewt.org/wildplay-thinks-differently

County by County - where to find out about your local nature-based activities and providers

Country-wide Social Farms & Gardens

Their map showcases hundreds of organisations that are doing inspiring work connecting people with nature; from city and care farms, to community gardens

Birmingham

- BCC's 'Improving your Health with Nature' Website
- Birmingham Open Spaces Forum
- Route2Wellbeing Directory Map
- Sport Birmingham's Local Outdoor Activity Finder
- Connect to Support: search 'nature', 'gardening', 'walking', 'conservation'
- The Waiting Room: search 'nature', 'gardening', 'walking', 'conservation'

Walsall

- Walsall Healthy Spaces | Facebook | Linktree
- Healthy spaces team Facebook
- Walsall Wellbeing Directory; search 'nature' or 'garden' or 'walking'

Sandwell

- Route2Wellbeing Directory

Dudley

- Community Information Directory; search 'nature', 'gardening', 'walking', 'conservation'
- Dudley Outdoor Active Facebook Page
- Healthy Dudley – Move More
- Dudley Nature Reserves Facebook page
- Dudley Parks Facebook page

Worcestershire

- Community Services Directory; search 'nature', 'gardening', 'walking' or 'conservation'
- Worcs Wildlife Trust map of community groups taking action for nature:

Herefordshire

- Talk Community Directory; search 'nature', 'gardening', 'walking' or 'conservation'
- Herefordshire Wildlife Trust events & volunteering page - free/small fee nature activities

Telford & Wrekin

- Live Well Community Directory; search 'nature', 'gardening', 'walking' or 'conservation'
- Healthy Telford; blogs, events and info on looking after physical and mental wellbeing. Includes the Green Spaces are Go project,
- Mossy Life Green Directory

Shropshire

- Shropshire's Great Outdoors Directory: interactive maps, access information, activities on offer across the county.
- Mossy Life Green Directory
- Shropshire Together Community and Family Directory - search 'nature', 'gardening', 'walking' or 'conservation'
- Shropshire Wildlife Trust events page - free/small fee nature-based activities.

Any suggestions of directories for nature-based activities, especially in other West Mids counties please let me know!

REQUESTS FOR SUPPORT / INVOLVEMENT

HELP!

Seeking photos of thriving nature in urban settings

We need your help in our Doorstep to Landscape project in Birmingham - we want to illustrate examples of where nature is thriving in urban settings. Examples include:

- Green infrastructure
- Green roofs
- pocket parks
- community patches
- housing and green together
- pocket meadows
- Brownfield sites that have been developed

Do you have any photos like this that you would like us to share (of course crediting you/your organisation). We will use these as examples to show the importance of this work and further our efforts

Please send any photos to Amber.Marquand@naturalengland.org.uk or any questions!

Nature Connectedness Research Invitation

The University of Derby's Nature Connectedness Research Group is inviting people whose work involves connecting others with nature to take part in a short online survey. The research aims to better understand barriers, opportunities and impacts across the nature connection sector, helping to shape future policy and practice. This is a chance to make sure the realities of frontline practice are reflected in future research, funding and policy. The survey takes around 15-20 minutes and is open until **30th January 2026**.

Call for local green space organisations

Dr Kiki (Kyriaki) Giannou is a Birmingham-based psychology researcher looking to collaborate with local organisations that manage green spaces. She is working with community groups to better understand how nature experiences support wellbeing, nature connection and a sense of belonging – particularly across Birmingham's diverse communities.

Recent research suggests the UK is among the lowest countries for connectedness to nature. This project aims to explore whether this is true at a local level, and why, by working alongside the organisations and people who know these spaces best.

The research is genuinely collaborative. Local organisations are recognised as the experts in their communities, and Kiki's team brings psychological research expertise to support organisations to:

- better understand and evidence their impact
- explore useful and practical evaluation approaches
- capture short- and long-term outcomes around wellbeing, nature connection and social cohesion

Involvement can be flexible and proportionate – from helping shape evaluation methods, to taking part in interviews or simple wellbeing measures, or co-designing activities and programmes together.

If your organisation would be interested in being involved, please contact Kiki at kyriaki.giannou@dmu.ac.uk or kyriaki.giannou@gmail.com.

WHAT'S ON FOR NATURE #1



NATURE NOOK
UNITED SUPPORT GROUP CIC

**SENSORY GARDEN
OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES**

Open to All

Contact us to book your place

This project is part-funded by the UK government through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund and from Walsall Council Public Health Tackling Inactivity Fund. The UK Shared Prosperity Fund aims to improve pride in place and increase life chances across the UK investing in communities and place, supporting local business, and people and skills. For more information visit: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-shared-prosperity-fund-prospectus>

Funded by UK Government Walsall Council West Midlands Combined Authority crowdfund Walsall



Upcoming Activity Sessions
Mondays between 11 am and 1 pm

Come along and join us for a fun filled activity.

12th January 2026
26th January 2026
9th February 2026
23rd February 2026
9th March 2026
23rd March 2026

10th November 2025
24th November 2025
8th December 2025

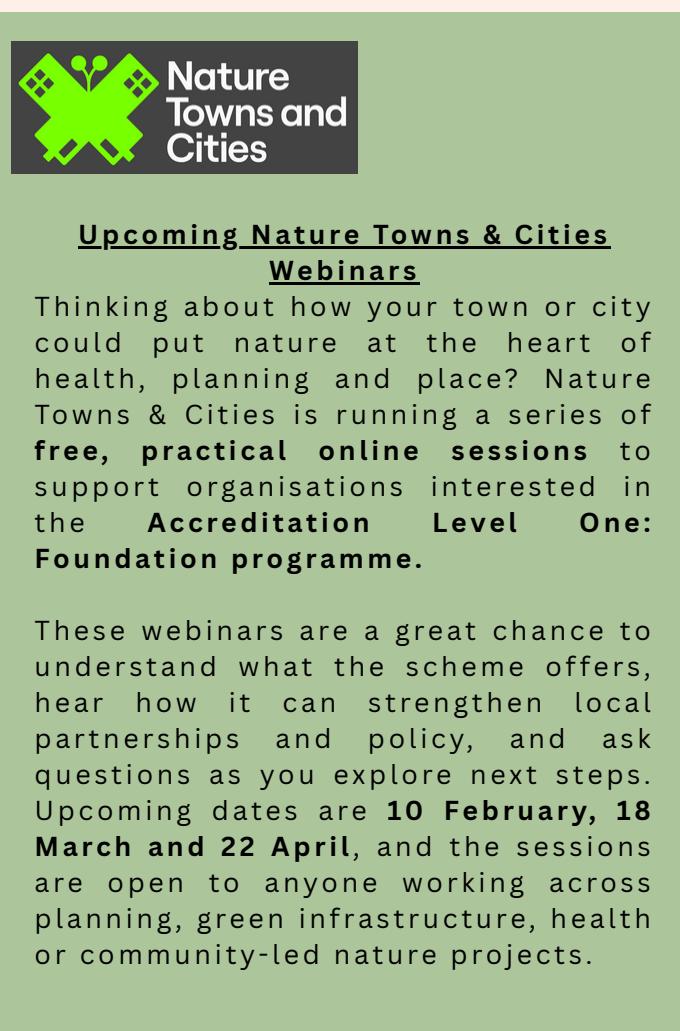
Each session will have a different theme; working on **movement, mental wellbeing, skills development plus much more.**

Group and one to one therapeutic play sessions
Improve mood and emotional regulation
Learn new skills
Meet new people
Experience hands on gardening activities
Parent/Carer Group Session
Adult Participant Social Group Session
One to One session by appointment only

FAMILIES WELCOME. Children are the responsibility of parents/carers.

Scan the QR Code

info@unitedsupportgroup.co.uk
www.unitedsupportgroup.co.uk
Manor Farm CA, King George Crescent, Rushall, WS4 1EU



Nature Towns and Cities

Upcoming Nature Towns & Cities Webinars

Thinking about how your town or city could put nature at the heart of health, planning and place? Nature Towns & Cities is running a series of **free, practical online sessions** to support organisations interested in the **Accreditation Level One: Foundation programme**.

These webinars are a great chance to understand what the scheme offers, hear how it can strengthen local partnerships and policy, and ask questions as you explore next steps. Upcoming dates are **10 February, 18 March and 22 April**, and the sessions are open to anyone working across planning, green infrastructure, health or community-led nature projects.



UNITED MOVEMENT

STRONGER TOGETHER

Saturday 7th February 11 am to 1.30 pm
Walsall Arboretum Visitors Centre

An event bringing together Men and Movement activities and groups.

Network, Share, & Signpost Services

Fitness Groups **Men's Walks** **Support Groups** **Cycling Groups**

MEN'S WELLBEING • MOVEMENT • COMMUNITY

Contact Amrit Singh on lovemettaminds@gmail.com

WHAT'S ON FOR NATURE #2

Coppice to Craft A Woodland Skills Weekend

Step back in time. No machines. No noise...

Just hands, tools, fire, woodland.

A living woodland weekend exploring biodiversity, coppicing and traditional greenwood crafts- showing how woods can support nature, skill, and rural livelihoods.

Join us in the woods for :

- Hurdle making
- Spoon & stick carving
- Stool making
- Loom weaving
- Butter making
- Homely woodland crafts



Sat 28 Feb & Sun 1 Mar
10am-4pm



The Green Wood Centre
Ironbridge

Crafters and demonstrators wanted- get in touch



Rebecca.Vincent.Evans@smallwoods.org.uk



Tai Chi & Qigong in Birmingham's Parks

Tai Chi & Qigong involves gentle exercise that combines breathing and relaxation with slow movements, proven to have benefits for both physical and mental health. No previous experience is necessary - so why not give it a go?

Inc Kings Heath, Handsworth, Cotteridge, Bournville Park and many others.
Check out venues [here](#).



We Love Potatoes - Growing Day

Castle Bromwich Historic Gardens
15 February 2026, 11:00 am-2:30 pm

A fun community day all about potatoes. Whether you're new to growing or more experienced, there will be opportunities to learn how to grow potatoes, try a "grow a plate of potatoes" doorstep kit, and browse a selection of 18 different seed potato varieties on sale. This event is part of the gardens' seasonal food and growing programme and is suitable for all ages.



Fruit & Nut Village has a busy programme of community events taking place across Birmingham at the end of January.

These include forest garden care sessions, fruit tree pruning and hedge care workshops, and planting activities, all focused on supporting local food growing spaces and biodiversity.

Most events are free, welcoming and suitable for beginners.

Visit the [Fruit & Nut Village website](#) for full details and dates.

NETWORKS TO BE A PART OF

Coventry & Warwickshire GSP Community of Practice

We are a relatively new group of Green social prescribing practitioners/professionals, who are working in the Coventry and Warwickshire area and are keen to connect with partners to exchange ideas, support each other and to campaign to raise awareness of the importance of GSP to support health and wellbeing. We are keen to work with partners across our geography and to make connections with anyone who has an interest in GSP.

We are in the process of identifying our priorities for 2026 and will be sharing these and news in the form of a regular newsletter.

If you would like to connect with us, please email our facilitator Karen Higgins on: karen-higgins1@outlook.com



West Midlands
Combined Authority

Community Environment Network

Run by the West Midlands Combined Authority, this network brings together local people, groups, and organisations who care about nature, climate, and community. It offers free membership, events, and peer support to help communities share ideas, access resources, and work together on projects that improve local green spaces and wellbeing. Nature helps us feel better, get active, and connect – this network makes it easier to turn that into action. **Join our Month of Action in March!** [Find out more and join here](#)



Green Social Prescribing Innovation Community

A national network for anyone helping people connect with nature for health and wellbeing. Whether you work in healthcare, local government, the environment or the voluntary sector, this is a space to share ideas, access resources, and collaborate. Join a growing movement making Green Social Prescribing more inclusive, accessible, and effective—so more people can benefit from the power of nature.



Nature Connectedness Network

Open to all, this national network explores how time in nature can support different areas of work. Members can join themed groups and nodes, including Nature Connectedness for Health and Wellbeing, Children and Young People, and Nature for NHS Staff Wellbeing.

Nature Towns & Cities Network



A programme by The National Lottery Heritage Fund, National Trust and Natural England aims to improve access to nature by helping local authorities, communities and partners bring green space into every neighbourhood.

The [Nature Towns and Cities Network](#) is open and free to join, offering events, training and resources for community groups, charities and local government.

NEW RESOURCES



RHS State of Gardening Report

The Royal Horticultural Society's State of Gardening report brings together the latest research on how people across the UK are gardening today, including trends, challenges and the benefits gardening brings for wellbeing, communities and the environment. It offers useful insights for anyone working in health, community engagement or green space projects, helping to strengthen the case for gardening as a tool for connection, resilience and positive change.

Planning for healthy places:

a practical guide for local authorities on embedding health in Local Plans and planning policies in England



National
Academy
for Social
Prescribing

Green Social Prescribing Evidence Review and Briefings

A new evidence review from the National Academy for Social Prescribing and Edge Hill University highlights how nature-based activities can support people living with long-term conditions, improving wellbeing and helping to relieve pressure on the health system. Commissioned as part of the cross-government Green Social Prescribing Programme, supported by Natural England, the review is accompanied by short evidence briefings that offer a clear, practical resource for practitioners and commissioners.



The Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP)

Published on 1st Dec 2025 sets out national priorities for restoring nature and improving environmental quality in England. For VCFSE and health partners, it offers a helpful reference for aligning nature-based and wellbeing projects, funding bids and partnerships with government priorities around access to nature, prevention and place-based working. The plan underpins much of Natural England's work and the programmes it supports, helping organisations demonstrate how local activity contributes to wider system goals.

USEFUL NATURE CONNECTION RESOURCES

NATURE CONNECTION HANDBOOK

Developed with the Uni of Derby and Natural England.

The importance of connecting with nature: including case studies on nature on prescription and social prescribing.



NATURE CONNECTION PRACTICES

Set of 5 nature connection practices to help activate the 5 pathways to nature connectedness. Each one takes just a few minutes a day alongside ordinary daily activities. E.g. watching videos of nature for 10 minutes every day can increase nature connection and reduce feelings of stress.



NATURE BUDDIES TOOLKIT

The Toolkit includes information on how to:

- Design a Nature Buddies programme to build on interests of volunteers and the people you work with
- Enhance your offer and recruit new volunteers, and support existing volunteers.
- Empower people to feel better, improving their mental health, other health outcomes and build social connections
- Build people's connection to outdoor spaces / nature near them
- Measure success and impact
- Evidence from pilot of impacts of Nature Buddies on wellbeing & nature connection
- Case studies and testimonials



GREEN SOCIAL PRESCRIBING E-LEARNING MODULE FOR HEALTH PROFESSIONALS

Natural England have been working in collaboration with Dr William Bird at Intelligent Health, NHS partners, NASP and online training education provider, Red Whale, to create two GSP e-learning modules. Includes a 30-minute video explaining evidence and health benefits of connecting patients to nature. And 15-minute consultation video with simple, practical steps for how to integrate nature into everyday practice.



CREATING A COMMUNITY GARDEN/GREENSPACE FOR WELLBEING?

Health Leads, Amber Marquand and Mandy Preece, have created a Resource Map - a compilation of useful websites and resources - for anyone interested in creating garden spaces to improve peoples' health and wellbeing, but also to benefit nature and wildlife.

We hope it's helpful - please share around!



NATURE FOR HEALTH RESOURCE HUB



The hub shares essential, free tools and guidance for developing green spaces on healthcare sites. And makes it easier for healthcare staff to develop nature-positive environments that benefit patients, staff and wildlife. It also includes recommendations for to embed nature into NHS training and policy.

RESOURCES Page on NHS Forest can be filtered into Clinical, Estates and Facilities, Sustainability...

Includes Training, webinars, evidence etc...

WHY NATURE WORKS: THE EVIDENCE

- Links between natural environments and mental health - EIN065 (naturalengland.org.uk)
- Links between natural environments and physical health - EIN066 (naturalengland.org.uk)
- How the Natural Environment can support Children and Young People - EIN067 (naturalengland.org.uk)
- Connection to Nature - EIN068 (naturalengland.org.uk)

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Although I hope that this newsletter will contain something useful for everyone, I completely understand if you feel it is not relevant for you. Please email me (Amber) if you would like to opt out of receiving my newsletter at any time. Thank you.