

Nature-based integration:

The Role of Nature in integration for Blackburn with Darwen





Summary

This document summarises findings and presents recommendations related to nature-based integration and the role of publicly accessible spaces in nature both in the UK and, specifically, in Blackburn with Darwen. These findings stem from our 'Nature-Based Integration: connecting communities with/in nature' project, funded by the Nuffield Foundation and the British Academy. Our findings highlight key interventions that enable various stakeholders to harness the transformative, yet often untapped, power of nature to aid integration. This project explored how nature contributes to the integration of migrants and established local communities, utilizing a variety of participatory and reflective methods. These included analyzing participatory mapping surveys, conducting community aesthetic workshops and making reflexive observations of natural spaces. We provide further illustrations of these methods in this document.

Our project recognises the untapped potential for policy related to nature engagement to influence factors such as wellbeing, belonging and social cohesion in a migrant integration context (although our findings also further emphasise related evidence for the positive potential of nature engagement for many diverse intersections of society).

After summarising our research methodology, we present key findings from our project for Blackburn with Darwen, before listing the recommendations that we provide based on our project's findings. Then we provide further context related to parks in Blackburn with Darwen and, finally, we present our UK-wide project findings.

The recommendations in this document can be considered alongside those in our final report *Nature-Based Integration: Connecting Communities with/in Nature*, our *Nature-Based Integration Toolkit* and other resources listed at the end of this report, which apply to diverse geographical contexts.

Methodology

■ Participatory mapping survey

We employed participatory mapping¹ to gather insights into the Haringey residents' engagement with the natural environment. We engaged 105 residents in Blackburn.

Participants were asked to mark on a local map the places they felt most connected to and discuss their reasons, including details about their activities, transportation means, etc. Another mapping query focused on places they prefer to avoid, seeking explanations and listing any additional unvisited locations. The survey also gathered demographic information—such as country of birth, ethnic background, age, gender, and postcode—to discern patterns of usage linked to intersectional identities.

■ Community aesthetic workshops

In Blackburn, we conducted four community workshops with diverse groups of residents, conducting visual

and sensory artistic activities to leverage collective experiences and explore the nuanced effects of nature on the lives of residents². Informal interviews and discussions complemented these sessions, with the materials generated during the workshops later co-analysed by the research team and Community Researchers through a sensory ethnographic lens, aligned with our Conceptual Framework. Workshop discussion transcripts were also coded and evaluated in line with Braun and Clarke's iterative steps to thematic analysis³.

■ Reflexive observations⁴

As part of our data collection in Blackburn, we also carried out 9 reflexive observations, which took place in Bold Venture Park, the canal side in Blackburn, Corporation Park, Queen's Park, and Witton Country Park. Both lead and community researchers participated, adopting distinct yet complementary perspectives. The findings of these reflexive observations are also factored into our analysis here.

Key Findings for Blackburn with Darwen

- **Community Well-being and Nature Engagement:** Parks and other natural areas serve as essential venues for physical and psychological well-being, offering a space for walking, picnics, sports, and other activities that contribute to a healthy lifestyle. They provide an accessible escape from urban stress, allowing individuals to engage in multisensory experiences that foster a sense of peace and tranquillity.
- **Social Connections and Integration:** The research highlights the importance of parks and other natural areas in strengthening family bonds and community ties, particularly among diverse

ethnic backgrounds. Parks in particular are seen as welcoming spaces that support inclusivity and facilitate interactions that are vital for community integration.

- **Heritage, Memory, and Belonging:** Nature engagement is closely linked to personal and collective memories, with parks and other natural areas playing a crucial role in connecting individuals to their heritage and fostering a sense of belonging. This connection is instrumental in building identity and reinforcing social cohesion within the community.

1 Brown, G. & Kyttä, M. (2018). Key issues and priorities in participatory mapping: Toward integration or increased specialization? *Applied Geography*, 95, 1–8.

2 Pink, S. (2015). *Doing Sensory Ethnography*. Sage; Bal, M. & Hernández-Navarro, M. A. (2011) *Art and Visibility in Migratory Culture: Conflict, Resistance, and Agency*. Brill; and Petersen, A. R. (2018), *Migration into Art: Transcultural identities and art-making in a globalised world*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

3 Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp0630a>.

4 Reflexive observations involved sessions where the research team visited local natural places in our case studies reflecting on key questions around nature and integration.

■ **Sensemaking and aesthetics:** This relates to the multisensory ways we interact with diverse natural environments, and how this enables us to establish meaningful connections with nature and place more broadly. Our data associated with Corporation Park, for instance, provides evidence of individuals and families interacting with infrastructure and natural environments to establish a feeling of ‘escape’ and find equilibrium in nature. Aesthetic elements were highlighted as crucial in this dynamic, as this process of escape was associated strongly with inspiring and diverse settings that allowed people to feel closer to nature. Accessibility and Inclusivity: Despite the positive attributes, issues of accessibility and safety were identified, particularly affecting women and individuals from ethnically diverse backgrounds.

These barriers highlight the need for targeted strategies to ensure parks are safe, inclusive, and accessible to all community members.

One of the methods we implemented was a participatory mapping survey that asked respondents to select what area in nature they connect most to in the region. The map in Figure 1 is an example of the participatory maps we produced. This one isolate responses associated with escape, freedom, tranquillity and beauty, and illustrates the importance of Corporation Park for people who identify as migrant or non-migrant. These results contribute to our understanding of how connecting with nature, in forging stronger connections between families, contributes to greater stability and social bonds as recognised as crucial in the Indicators of Integration, for example⁵.

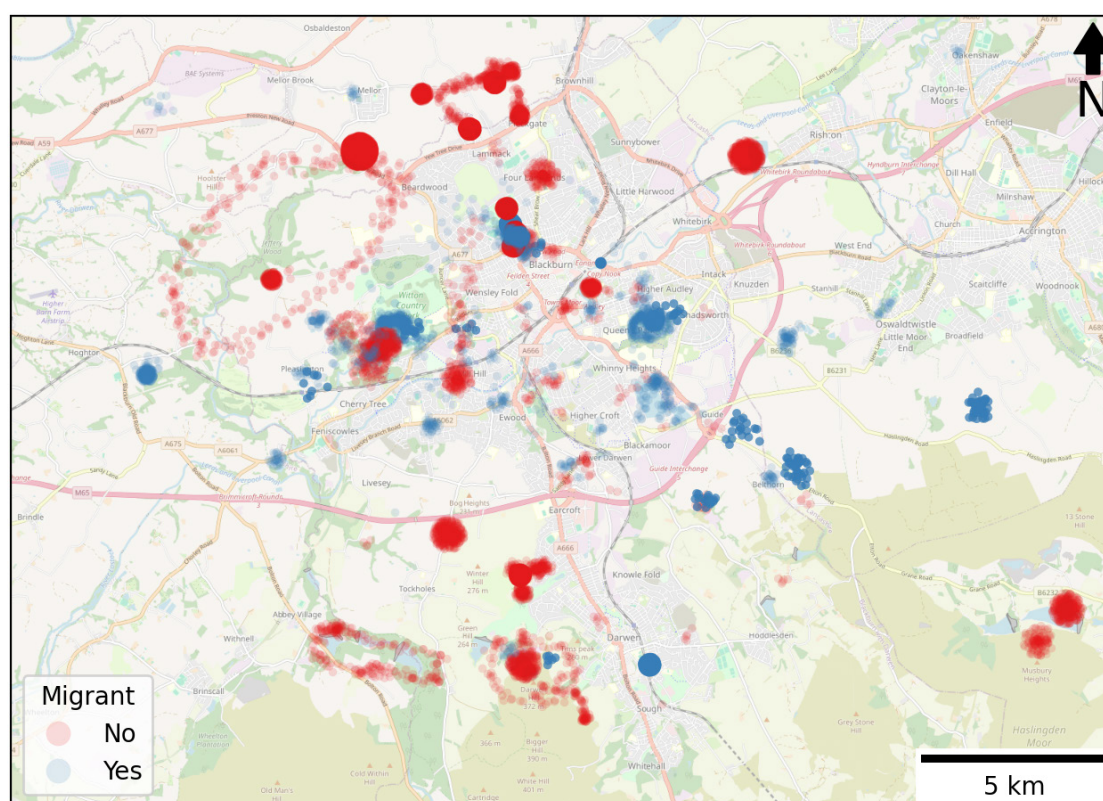


Figure 1: locations associated with escape, freedom, tranquillity and beauty, distinguishing respondents by self-identified migrant/non-migrant status

5 Ndofor-Tah, C., Strang, A., Phillimore, J., Morrice, L., Michael, L., Wood, P., & Simmons, J. (2019) Indicators of integration framework 2019: third edition. Accessible at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/home-office-indicators-of-integration-framework-2019>.

Recommendations for Local Council Planning and Strategy

Our research on nature-based integration strategies has demonstrated significant potential for parks and other natural areas in enhancing the integration of migrants within the local council area. The unique benefits of engaging with nature—increasing physical health, psychological well-being, and fostering a sense of community—can be realised through the interventions outlined below:

- **Enhance Accessibility and Safety:** Implement measures to improve the physical accessibility of parks and other natural areas and address safety concerns to ensure they are welcoming and secure for all community members, particularly focusing on lighting, surveillance, and maintenance to reduce barriers for women and ethnically diverse groups.
- **Promote Inclusive Programming:** Develop and promote activities within parks and other natural areas that cater to a wide range of interests and age groups, emphasizing inclusivity and the representation of diverse cultural backgrounds to strengthen community ties and integration.
- **Leverage Parks for Community Health:** Encourage the use of parks for physical activities and mental health programs, highlighting their role in

enhancing well-being and providing a natural escape from urban stress.

- **Preserve and Enhance Natural Features:** Prioritize the maintenance and enhancement of parks' and other natural areas' features, including green spaces, water bodies, and biodiversity, to support ecological sustainability and provide varied sensory experiences for visitors.
- **Foster Community Engagement and Ownership:** Involve the community in the planning, development, and management of parks' and other natural areas' spaces to ensure they meet the needs and preferences of local residents, fostering a sense of ownership and responsibility towards these natural assets.

The findings from Blackburn with Darwen provide a compelling case for the integral role of parks and other natural areas in urban environments. By prioritizing nature-based integration in city planning, local councils can harness the myriad benefits nature offers for community well-being, social integration, and environmental sustainability. Implementing the recommendations outlined can lead to more vibrant, inclusive, and healthy communities, where nature serves as a fundamental pillar of urban life.

Further context related to Parks in Blackburn with Darwen

- **Enhanced Well-being through Nature Engagement**
The study vividly illustrates that parks are not merely open spaces but vital conduits for physical and mental well-being. The engagement with nature, particularly in parks, offers a dual benefit: it aids in physical health through activities like walking, sports, and recreational exercises, and it serves as a sanctuary for mental peace, offering an escape from the urban stress life. The emphasis on the multisensory experiences available in these green spaces highlights the nuanced ways in which individuals interact with their environment, seeking solace and a sense of balance amidst nature's diverse aesthetic offerings.
- **Social Fabric and Community Integration**
Parks emerge as pivotal platforms for fostering social connections, which are essential for building a cohesive community fabric. The research underscores the significant role parks play in enhancing family relationships and providing welcoming spaces for individuals from diverse backgrounds. This aspect is particularly relevant in fostering integration within the community, as parks offer a neutral ground where people can meet, interact, and bond over shared experiences. This finding points towards the necessity of designing inclusive park programs that cater to the diverse needs of the community, thereby reinforcing social

ties and promoting a sense of belonging among all community members.

- **Memory, Heritage, and Sense of Belonging** A compelling connection between nature engagement and memory recall was observed, with parks playing a crucial role in connecting individuals to their personal and collective heritage. This connection not only enriches the present experience of nature engagement but also contributes to a deeper sense of identity and belonging. The data suggests that parks can act as living repositories of cultural and historical memory, thus emphasizing the need for their preservation and incorporation into community identity narratives.
- **Barriers to Access and Recommendations for Improvement** Despite the benefits, the study identified critical barriers to accessing nature, particularly for women and individuals from ethnically diverse backgrounds. Safety, security, and physical accessibility were highlighted as areas needing urgent attention. To address these issues, it is recommended that local councils invest in infrastructure improvements, enhance safety measures, and develop targeted outreach programs

to ensure parks are accessible and welcoming to all segments of the community.

- **Authentic Connections with Nature** The research underscores the importance of fostering authentic connections with nature, highlighting how such connections can significantly influence an individual's sense of self and belonging. Parks offer a unique setting for these connections to flourish, suggesting the need for strategies that encourage individual and collective engagement with nature in meaningful ways.

The insights gleaned from the study of Blackburn with Darwen's parks provide a blueprint for how local councils can harness the power of nature-based integration to enhance community well-being, foster social cohesion, and address accessibility challenges. By prioritizing the development and maintenance of parks as essential community assets, councils can create more resilient, inclusive, and healthy urban environments. Strategic investments in park infrastructure, inclusive programming, and community engagement initiatives are crucial steps towards realizing the full potential of parks as catalysts for positive community and environmental outcomes.

UK-wide project findings

Nature-based integration fosters relationships between humans, nature, and culture in different time periods and locations. Our project found that nature has a beneficial effect on the integration of various communities, including migrants, non-migrants, people with migrant backgrounds, refugees, and asylum seekers. The project focused on nature's impact on health, well-being, identity, social connections, and accessibility, leading to the following key findings:

- **Health and Wellbeing:** Nature engagement was universally recognized for its physical and psychological benefits, with exercise and horticulture mentioned as key activities enhancing physical health and offering psychological solace. Participants shared experiences of nature as a source of joy, motivation, and a means of escape from daily stresses.

- **Identity and Culture:** The natural environment played a crucial role in shaping participants' sense of identity and cultural integration, with nature acting as a common ground for diverse communities. Engaging with nature facilitated connections, creative expression, and a rediscovery of cultural and personal heritage through memories and sensory experiences.
- **Social Connections:** Nature served as a vital arena for building social bonds, with its universal appeal bridging gaps between different community segments. The analysis underscored nature's role in fostering community cohesion and providing a space for meaningful interactions among residents with varied settlement histories.

Accessibility: Despite the recognized benefits, challenges in accessing nature were identified,

particularly for certain demographics and geographies. Barriers included lifestyle constraints, socio-economic factors, and infrastructural limitations. The importance of inclusive, supportive infrastructures and programs to enhance nature accessibility was highlighted.

- **Nature and Sense of Belonging:** The discussions suggested that connecting with nature can aid in the adaptive phase of settling into a new area, fostering a sense of belonging. This connection needs to be nurtured, akin to building social connections, highlighting nature's role in both personal and communal integration processes.

Aesthetic Workshops: The effectiveness of aesthetic workshops as a research and integration tool was

affirmed, with their multisensory, creative approach enriching the data collection and providing a platform for intercultural exchange and learning about nature.

The findings indicate that connecting with nature can aid in the process of adapting to a new area and foster a sense of belonging. Nature connects us with ecosystems, ecologies, sociologies, geologies, and cosmologies beyond our immediate understanding. These connection needs to be nurtured, similar to building social connections, highlighting nature's role in both personal and communal integration processes. Therefore, by intertwining nature engagement with the Home Office Indicators of Integration, there is potential to foster more inclusive and cohesive communities.



Additional Resources



Link to our project website



Link to report



Link to toolkit

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