Nature-Based Integration Policy and Practice Toolkit

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Introduction

Amid the growing challenges faced by migrant communities and their integration in the UK, our project 'Nature-Based Integration: Connecting Communities with/in Nature' [1] funded by the Nuffield Foundation and the British Axademy highlights 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, making reflexive observations of natural spaces, and surveying nature-based integration efforts across the UK. We provide further illustrations of these methods in this document.

Our research conducted with diverse stakeholders and community members across the UK demonstrate how nature engagement is important to integration by impacting fundamental domains as referenced in the Home Office's 2019 Indicators of Integration [2] such as social connections, health and wellbeing, stability and culture. Nature engagement influences integration in this way due to its relationship with processes including natural environment-specific socialising, aesthetics and sensemaking, and the establishment of authentic connections with nature which uniquely influence belonging and identity.

The interventions outlined below describe specific ways that these important nature-based interventions can be operationalised. Most of the interventions relate to a broad range of actors including regional policymakers, funders and community leaders. Some interventions, such as Enhancing Access to Natural Spaces, may pertain more to regional or local policymakers. However,

others, such as Cultural Practices Informing Nature-Based Integration - should be of interest to community organisations or community leaders. The full range of recommended interventions are organised as such:

- Integration through Nature-Based Activities;
- Cultural Practices Informing Nature-Based Integration;
- Enhancing Access to Natural Spaces;
- Safety and Inclusivity;
- Cultural Congruence and Engagement; and
- Community-Centred Design;

This document also includes selected examples of initiatives recorded in our nature-based integration initiative survey (carried out in 2022 and 2023) that illustrate and provide useful context of some of the interventions above in action.

Underpinning the interventions outlined in this toolkit should be an agile user-centred approach [3] that prioritises consultation with and co-development of strategies alongside communities. Some of the interventions included in this toolkit and described in the document's case studies address this challenge of consultation and co-development directly.

The range of interventions in this toolkit represents an ideal grouping of nature-based integration strategies as identified in our study. We hope that a wide range of actors across different sectors can cooperate to apply as many of these interventions as possible as part of a holistic, place-based model that maximises the potential of nature-based integration in as many communities as possible.

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1   Nuffield Foundation, 'Nature-based integration: connecting communities with/in nature,' https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/project/nature-based-integration-connecting-communities-with-in-nature, accessed May 1, 2024.

2   Ndofor-Tah, C., Strang, A., Phillimore, A., Morrice, L., Michael, L., Wood, P., and Simmons, J., Indicators of Integration framework 2019 (London: Home Office, 2019), accessed May 1, 2024, [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/627cc6d3d3bf7f052d33b06e/home-office-indicators-of-integration-framework-2019-horr109.pdf].

3   See https://www.gov.uk/guidance/open-policy-making-toolkit/getting-started-with-open-policy-making for more information on the merits and approaches inherent in agile policymaking.

Methodology

Our findings stem from our project investigating the general role of nature in influencing the integration of migrant people and longstanding local communities. The project implemented a range of participatory and reflexive methods, however here we present findings from analyses of participatory mapping surveys, community aesthetic workshops, reflexive observations of nature spaces, and a survey of nature-based integration initiatives carried out in the UK, as these provided operational findings. While our nature-based integration initiative survey was UK-wide in scope, the other methods described were conducted in three different case study sites: the London borough of Haringey, Blackburn with Darwen, and the isle of Lewis – areas selected as contrasting examples of urban, peri-urban and rural environments, respectively. To ensure the relevance and of our findings to the local communities we were working with, our project employed Community Researchers from those very communities, who helped us to deliver the methods listed below and contextualise our findings.

Participatory mapping survey

We employed participatory mapping[4] to gather insights into the people's engagement with the natural environment. For the participatory mapping survey, we engaged 119 residents in the London borough of Haringey, 105 residents in Blackburn with Darwen, and 76 in the isle of Lewis.

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

We conducted four community workshops in each case study area, working with diverse groups of residents. In the community workshops, we conducted visual and sensory artistic activities to leverage collective experiences and explore the nuanced effects of nature on the lives of residents .[5]

Reflexive observations

As part of our data collection in the three case study areas, we also carried out reflexive observations - which took place in parks, other green spaces and areas by rivers, canals and coasts. Both lead and Community Researchers participated, adopting distinct yet complementary perspectives. The findings of these reflexive observations are also factored into our analysis here.

Nature-based integration initiatives survey

Our survey explored of nature-engaged integration initiatives across the UK, including those ran by charities, universities, governments, and communities. The survey was conducted in 2022 and 2023, and culminated in a detailed geographical mapping and analysis, compiled into a database[6] showcasing the diversity and reach of nature-based integration efforts across the UK.

4   Brown, G. and Kyttä, M. (2018) 'Key issues and priorities in participatory mapping: Toward integration or increased specialization?', Applied Geography, 95, pp. 1–8. doi: 10.1016/j.apgeog.2018.04.002.

5   Bal, M. and Hernández-Navarro, M. A., (2011) Art and Visibility in Migratory Culture: Conflict, Resistance, and Agency (Brill); and Pink, S., (2015) Doing Sensory Ethnography (Sage).

6   The database is available here [LINK]

Toolkit Interventions

Underpinning these interventions should be an agile user-centred approach[7] that prioritises consultation with and co-development of strategies alongside communities. Some of the interventions included here address this challenge of consultation and co-development, specifically. For each theme listed below we suggest interventions (i.e. the bullet points) and proposed actors that can implement them, also listing the evidence from our project that we collected in support of each of them.

Integration Through Nature-Based Activities

Parks and recreation departments, community organisations, educational institutions and language learning programmes should:

1. Fund, support and run nature-based programmes that facilitate integration, such as community gardening projects, nature walks, and outdoor education programmes – platforming activities that promote social interaction and cultural exchange.

2. Encourage the development of programmes that use nature as a backdrop for language learning and cultural orientation for newcomers. Core nature-based integration activities can be made more accessible through provision of supplementary activities that address various community needs. For example, building a playground or organising a homework club for children can encourage more families to take part.

> ❝ 'So obviously there are people that live all around me, um, and I didn't know many of them. Um, but through this, through becoming a friend of the park, um, and taking part in more activities in the park, um, I feel like I'm really getting to know the people who live like really close to my house.'
>
> **Aesthetic workshop participant, London borough of Haringey.**

The positive impact on integration of activities carried out in nature was obvious from across our research, including that stemming from our survey of existent nature-based integration initiatives – which documented successes in improving physical and mental wellbeing for migrant participants in various projects as well as demonstrating how nature served an important role as a commons, fostering social connections between people from different backgrounds. This data also clearly showed how work in this area can be two-fold, improving social and health outcomes in communities while simultaneously promoting environmental restoration and ecological diversity.

Cultural Practices Informing Nature-Based Integration

Channelling diverse cultural practices is key to making some of the nature-based integration interventions mentioned above successful. Policy and grassroots actors from a diverse range of bodies including cultural affairs organisations, parks and recreation departments, community organisations, educational institutions, migrant groups, environmental groups and healthcare services, should leverage:

1. Rituals and Traditions

> ❝ 'When I feel at home is where I can find those memories.'
>
> **Aesthetic workshop participant, Blackburn with Darwen.**

Our participant testimonies demonstrated how the multisensory aspects of nature engagement can be closely linked with memory and connecting with one's distinct heritage and culture, regardless of where one was born or grew up. This connection can help forge a greater sense of belonging, familiarity and trust in

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7   See https://www.gov.uk/guidance/open-policy-making-toolkit/getting-started-with-open-policy-making
     for more information on the merits and approaches inherent in agile policymaking.

a new area – linking directly to recognised domains of integration such as Stability.[8]

Thus, it is important to recognize and incorporate the rich variety of rituals and traditions associated with nature in different cultures into integration programmes. This can include organizing events around traditional harvest festivals or nature-related holidays can provide opportunities for cultural exchange and mutual understanding.

2.   Folklore and Storytelling

> ❝ 'Growing is about connections for me and I, the tried many times to grow this Turkish breakfast peppers, this tiny long green pepper that we eat fresh, you know, from the branch in the mornings. I couldn't, I brought seed from everywhere. Collected, couldn't. So I give up and I decided that, okay, I'll make peace with this land and what grows here.'
>
> **Aesthetic workshop participant, London borough of Haringey.**

Our research emphasised the way that creative expression and cultural heritage contributed to people's recognition of their own authentic connections with nature. These authentic connections with nature were key in creating attachment to place, a dynamic important in resettlement and integration.[9]

Storytelling and folklore can be used as tools for integration by creating spaces within natural settings where individuals can share stories, legends, and personal experiences related to nature. This can help build bridges between diverse community members, fostering a sense of shared humanity and deepening connections to the natural world.

3.   The Therapeutic Benefits of Cultural Practices

> ❝ 'I don't like small talk, but I realize that art is such a great vehicle. I, I'm having always difficult to have this talk and uh, you know, either I go very deep, I open up and then I get s 'cause what I revealed about myself, putting myself in corner as a vulnerable, which I did last time. And so I was quite afraid of this session, you know what it'll reveal about me. But this time it was purely art so I really enjoyed it. So it doesn't necessarily, we need to talk about things and reveal things about our, and we just talking through it and it's ease the process. I happen to hear some even subtle comments, like even worse and it helped me a lot and I enjoyed it. Thank you.'
>
> **Aesthetic workshop participant, London borough of Haringey**

The actors mentioned above should acknowledge and incorporate the therapeutic aspects of cultural practices related to nature, such as traditional healing gardens, meditation spaces, or areas designated for communal singing or dancing. These practices can offer unique pathways to wellbeing and integration, providing newcomers with a sense of continuity and connection to their cultural roots.

The positive influence of these practices was evident in our own aesthetic workshops, where art-and-nature-based methods liberated participants to share cultures and ideas from diverse backgrounds and perspectives. Cultural practices were informally or formally a feature of many initiatives recorded in our nature-based integration initiative survey.

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8   Ndofor-Tah et al, Indicators of Integration framework 2019.

9   Zisakou, A., Figgou, L., and Andreouli, E., (2024) 'Integration and urban citizenship: A social-psychological approach to refugee integration through active constructions of place attachment to the city. Political Psychology', 45, pp. 215–233, doi: https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12919.

4. Collaboration with Cultural Organizations

These actors above should also partner with cultural organizations and community groups to design and implement nature-based integration initiatives. Our survey of Nature-Based Integration initiatives highlighted the importance of collaboration for success projects, identifying cross-referral, in-kind support and knowledge-sharing between actors across various public services, community groups and other sectors. Examples of successful collaborations included social prescription models between health services and community projects supporting vulnerable people, and small environmental restoration groups benefiting from use of council buildings or equipment pro bono. These collaborations can ensure that programmes are culturally relevant and responsive to the needs of diverse populations. Our research emphasises the role of creative expression and cultural exchange in connecting people to nature.

5. Education and Awareness

> " 'It would be great to gain a knowledge and learn more from others about different species of birds and varieties of plants and flowers. Um, growing our own veg and herbs has a positive impact on our mental health and it's more nutritious. So, so just all in all, it is great for our, the more you can get of it, the better for our health.'
>
> **Aesthetic workshop participant, isle of Lewis.**

The desire to share and learn about nature-based cultural practice was strongly evoked in our research workshops, particularly. Our survey of nature-based integration initiatives also highlighted the success of initiatives that channelled the inspiring force of education within a wider nature-based project.

Actors such as those mentioned above should promote education and awareness about the diverse ways in which different cultures engage with and understand nature. This can include workshops, exhibitions, and guided tours that highlight the ecological knowledge and practices of different cultural groups, enriching the community's overall engagement with natural spaces. Involving diverse groups in education projects about general environmental topics also has the potential to create meaningful social connections and a sense of attachment to place which can positively influence integration as well as the natural environment.

Enhancing Access to Natural Spaces

Local government actors, urban planners, transportation authorities and parks and recreation departments should:

- Ensure that natural spaces are easily accessible to all community members, including migrants, by improving affordable public transportation options and creating more pedestrian pathways. Accessibility issues for individuals with mobility challenges and families with young children should be addressed to ensure that everyone can enjoy nature's benefits. This includes making parks easier to access for wheelchair users through provision of disabled car parking spaces or ensuring that other accessible transport options are available.

In our research, factors associated with accessibility – such as proximity, transport and security – were strongly associated with the process of forging meaningful and beneficial connections within and with nature. As result of our project we found that many people form strong connections to parks or other expansive nature spaces that they live close to. Thus, consideration should be given by housing and infrastructure planners to ensure that every person has suitable nature spaces nearby.

Safety and Inclusivity

Community safety agencies, parks and recreation departments and community organisations carrying out nature-based activities should collaborate to:

1. Increase safety measures in natural spaces to address concerns that may deter individuals, especially women, from accessing these areas. These measures may include introduction of improved lighting as well as neighbourhood watches or safety patrols.

2. Promote inclusivity by designing spaces that cater to diverse cultural practices and preferences. Inclusive nature spaces should include areas for quiet contemplation alongside more active spaces.

Our research highlighted diverse ways in which people interact with favoured nature space to improve their wellbeing, build meaningful social connections, or establish a sense of belonging, for example. Well-maintained and aesthetically appealing children's play areas also provide greater incentive for families to spend time in nature. Many people connect to spaces that they can bring their pets to, while others - sometimes with specific cultural backgrounds - may prefer areas that provide space from pets. Actors such as those mentioned above should collaborate to ensure that people from a variety of backgrounds can reap these benefits associated with nature engagement and integration.

Cultural Congruence and Engagement

Parks and recreation departments and community organisations working on nature-based initiatives, as well as cultural affairs organisations who have interest in supporting work in this area, should work together to:

1. Develop programs that encourage intercultural exchange and understanding within natural settings, such as multicultural festivals, community gardens, and nature-based educational programs;

2. Advertise programmes widely as well as in a targeted manner to ensure people with diverse working, family, health, ethnic and other backgrounds are informed and encouraged to take part;

3. Make programmes accessible for people with diverse backgrounds. For example, as for other types of community development programmes, organisers may consider the needs for childcare, travel expenses and interpreter support;

4. Develop nature-based initiatives in partnership with groups with history of tailored support for target groups to support best practice in engagement and facilitate shared learning; and

5. Train park staff and volunteers in cultural sensitivity to foster a welcoming environment for people from diverse backgrounds.

Our data from surveys and workshops indicated the need for tailored strategies to ensure that people from a variety of backgrounds feel inspired and welcome to engage in public nature spaces. Several nature-based initiatives recorded in our survey data, for example, attribute success with engagement and integration

outcomes as a result of referral and knowledge-exchange partnerships with local organisations with a history of supporting under-served groups such as people in the asylum system or those suffering from health issues (partnership with the latter demographics sometimes could take the form of a social prescription model).

Community-Centred Design

Parks and recreation authorities, urban planners or others working on nature space design should collaborate with organisations with experience supporting diverse and under-served communities (especially lived experience led groups) to:

1. Ensure truly equitable and accessible assistance (including monetary or in-kind support, where needed) is given to grassroots organisations and individuals involved in consultation and co-development on nature space design;

2. Engage diverse local communities, including migrant groups, in the planning and design of natural spaces to ensure inclusivity and responsiveness to various needs; and

3. Incorporate cultural elements, such as significant plants or designs, reflecting the community's heritage.

Involving local communities, including migrant groups, in the planning and design of natural spaces can help ensure that nature areas meet the needs and preferences of a diverse population. Our research shed further light on problems related to inequality in accessing nature spaces among different demographics. For example, engagement with female migrant groups can be necessary to help ensure trust in a space is built and welcoming infrastructure is developed to encourage meaningful consistent engagement.

Selected initiatives from our survey of UK Nature-Based Integration Initiatives

The following descriptions of initiatives recorded in our nature-based integration initiative survey (carried out in 2022 and 2023) illustrate and provide useful examples of some of the interventions above in action.

The Greenhouse Project, Lancashire Wildlife Trust[10]

The Greenhouse Project delivers activities focused on food growing and wildlife walks to improve health, wellbeing and integration of local people and promote a lifestyle of harmony with the natural world. The Greenhouse Project leads off from an initial project delivered in collaboration with a local NHS mental health service for young people. The success of this initial project prompted Lancashire Wildlife Trust to develop more nature- and wellbeing-focussed activities that could be accessed by all.

Many attendees are socially isolated and attending the project on a weekly basis gives them a good opportunity to spend time sharing, talking and reminiscing with others, encouraging peer support. The initiative is also a strong example of holistic and partnership working, further influencing integration and nature conservation/restoration. For example, participants do conservation work as part of sessions – which on occasion includes litter picks – helping to transform a previously-dilapidated area into a wildlife and food garden. Furthermore, the initiative works with local ESOL providers, using the context of walking in the natural world as a vehicle for developing English language skills for local migrant people.

Scotswood Garden (Newcastle upon Tyne)[11]

Scotswood Garden has been running as a conservation volunteering programme since 1995, based in Newcastle in an area of multiple deprivation. Interested in reaching people who were seeking asylum or from migrant communities, Scotswood Garden started a project with

West End Refugee Service, whose link worker is tasked with bringing people to the Garden and supporting them to participate.

Given that many people referred to the project are staying in isolated supported accommodation such as hotels in peripheral urban locations, the Garden and its initiative acts as a lifeline for forming important social and nature connections. Furthermore, given increasing challenges with mental health in this target group, the initiative has integrated activities such as art and cooking. The legacy of the Garden means that it can draw upon valuable infrastructure and experience in community activity for the Growing Together initiative. Volunteers and their family and friends are invited to take part in other initiatives and events ran by the Garden, including youth theatre clubs and festive celebrations. Participants' engagement with the project is supported crucially through transport expense coverage and even food to take home which has been produced on site.

Refugee, Asylum Seekers and Migrant Action (RAMA) (Colchester)[12]

As part of a wide range of integration services provided by Refugee, Asylum Seekers and Migrant Action (RAMA) in Colchester, they run forest school and other outdoor activities aimed at improving wellbeing and integration using nature-based methods. These activities are as diverse as food growing, bike maintenance, nature site maintenance (including wood chopping) and children's forest play.

The organisation collaborates with the local council, Together We Grow CIC and local community transport services to source relevant infrastructure and support. Volunteers are crucial to the project, with the organisation even recruiting sixth form students from a local school. Participant testimonies make it clear how impactful outdoors-based activities are, with people referencing

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10   Lancashire Wildlife Trust, 'Greenhouse Project', https://www.lancswt.org.uk/greenhouse-project, accessed May 1, 2024.

11   Scotswood Garden, https://scotswoodgarden.org.uk/, accessed May 1, 2024.

12   RAMA – Refugee, Asylum Seeker & Migrant Action, https://rama.org.uk/, accessed May 1, 2024.

their feeling of escape from difficult living conditions. Through the project, people from diverse backgrounds become empowered as volunteers, growing food and transforming the landscape to tackle local issues such as food poverty and environmental sustainability.

Conclusion

The toolkit interventions and selected initiative examples shown in this document provide explanation and context of meaningful ways in which to maximise the often-untapped potential of nature engagement in holistic place-based integration strategies.

The nature-based integration interventions in this toolkit draw from a wide body of primary research with a diverse range of stakeholders and community members across the UK. Applying these interventions in communities channels the potential of nature as a powerful catalyst for integration, contributing to improved wellbeing for wider groups of people while offering a space for shared experiences, social connections, and intercultural understanding that can enhance community resilience and promote a sense of belonging among residents with varied backgrounds and settlement histories.

For these strategies to work, it is the responsibility of policymakers at various levels to collaborate with other actors such as funders and community leaders to Enhance Access to Nature Spaces and channel Community-Centred Design principles, as outlined in this document.

A collaboration of this kind can help promote Safety and Inclusiveness as well as Cultural Congruence and Engagement as part of a nature-based integration strategy that reflects the needs of as wide and diverse a group of local people as possible in respective communities. Furthermore, while helping policymakers be accountable to these values outlined above, various community actors can pursue the Cultural Practices Informing Nature-Based Integration described in this document to spearhead the way for transformational change for people and the natural environment.

Based on the extensive insights and valuable examples provided in this document, it is imperative that the various strategies and recommendations for nature-based integration be embraced and implemented across different regions and communities. These strategies not only facilitate the essential process of migrant integration but also enrich the local communities by fostering mutual respect, understanding, and collaboration between migrants and long-standing residents. By leveraging the inherent restorative and connective properties of nature, these interventions can transform public and natural spaces into vibrant hubs of cultural exchange and social cohesion.

Furthermore, it is essential to continuously evaluate and adapt these nature-based strategies to reflect the evolving needs and dynamics of the communities they serve. Engaging continuously with stakeholders at all levels—from policymakers to community members—ensures that the interventions remain relevant, effective, and sensitive to the cultural and social fabric of each community. This adaptive approach will not only sustain the long-term success of nature-based integration efforts but also contribute to the overarching goals of social harmony and environmental stewardship. Through such committed and inclusive efforts, we can hope to see a future where nature serves as a universal ground for building stronger, more resilient communities.

Additional Resources

🌐   Link to our project website

📋   Link to report

💼   Link to toolkit

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