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POLICY BRIEF

The role of nature in migrant integration in the UK

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Summary of the Research

Migrants make up a significant portion of the UK's population, accounting for approximately 14% of those born overseas (Vargas-Silva & Rienzo, 2020). Furthermore, given the socio-political tensions arising from Brexit and 'Hostile Environment' policy, there has been a growing need for innovative integration approaches, particularly at the local level (Sobolewska & Ford, 2020; Vargas-Silva & Rienzo, 2020). However, due to austerity measures, funding for integration initiatives has been limited, leading to a shift towards cost-effective, community-led solutions (Phillimore, 2020). In this context, nature-based integration emerges as an untapped resource for facilitating integration.

Our project '*Nature-based integration: connecting communities with/in nature*' (NBI)¹ identified how **nature engagement impacts positively and uniquely on fundamental domains of integration as recognised in the Home Office's Indicators of Integration (Ndofor-Tah, et al., 2019), such as social connections, stability, culture, health and leisure.** This project funded by Nuffield Foundation and the British Academy was led by senior researchers from Anglia Ruskin University and Kingston University who engaged an interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral team consisting of academics, artists, policymakers, practitioners, and community members in an innovative and interdisciplinary, participatory research approach across three distinct UK case study regions.

Our project addresses a key gap in knowledge by engaging with multi-directional integration processes in local communities, whilst bringing together existing knowledge, addressing gaps, and translating findings into policy and practice relevant especially to a UK context.

Our project found that nature and nature engagement have a beneficial effect on the integration of various communities, including migrants, non-migrants, people with migrant backgrounds, refugees, and asylum seekers. We found that **nature engagement has a positive impact on people's health and wellbeing, shapes people's sense of identity and cultural integration, helps foster a sense of belonging to a new area and, finally, supports the development and strengthening of social connections.** However, we also found **key challenges such as unfamiliarity and insecurity that make nature inaccessible to key demographics such as migrants and migrant-background individuals.**

Our recommendations present the opportunity for the **Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) to leverage the multifaceted benefits of nature-based approaches in supporting its agenda and fostering more inclusive and cohesive communities.** This approach not only **supports migrants but also enriches local communities, fostering a shared sense of belonging and mutual respect for the environment.**

To further enhance DLUHC's plans and wider UK integration strategy, this briefing also recommends the running of a pilot study to implement and test nature-based integration activities with the whole of the local community, including asylum seekers, refugees and migrants, to boost opportunity for different intersectionalities to meet and connect via nature and evaluate cost-effective integration outcomes.

¹ More information on the project can be found here <https://naturebasedintegration.cargo.site/> and here <https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/project/nature-based-integration-connecting-communities-with-in-nature>

CURRENT STATUS

- Migrants constitute a significant portion of the UK's population, with approximately 14% being born overseas. This demographic fact underscores the importance of integration as a critical policy priority, especially given the socio-political tensions arising from Brexit and the 'Hostile Environment' policy (Vargas-Silva & Rienzo, 2022).
- The COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted significant inequalities within communities of migrant background, particularly in terms of access to green spaces (Geary et al., 2021). In addition, the pandemic highlighted the importance of access to nature and the positive effect on both physical and mental wellbeing (Martin et al., 2020), which is directly transferable to the support of migrants.
- These challenges, coupled with rising anti-immigrant sentiments and austerity-driven reductions in public service funding, underscore the urgent need for innovative, inclusive, and effective integration strategies.
- With a general election almost imminent, nature-based integration recommendations proposed by this research offers the chance for actors across the policy spectrum (i.e. policymakers, civil servants, politicians) to take advantage and offer support for progressive, non-partisan policies in this area.
- While immigration discourse continues to be divisive between parties in the UK, the proposals in this briefing can complement integration policies that harbour support from multiple parties and devolved governments, such as those featured in the Home Office Indicators of Integration (Ndofor-Tah, et al., 2019).
- Supporting the intersection of integration policy with nature-based policy strategies also introduces the opportunity of capturing public support around nature-based policies generally – with recent government data demonstrating both a strong public appreciation in England for nature's mental and physical health benefits (UK Government, 2023).
- Furthermore, our research underscores the positive influence of this type of community-first, place-based policy on diverse intersections of the community, regardless of migration status or identity.

BACKGROUND

- Despite UK integration policy's recent shift towards local perspectives, there has been a disproportionate emphasis on social and structural aspects, often overlooking the physical environment's crucial role.
- Integration is a critical policy issue, especially given the socio-political tensions following from Brexit and 'Hostile Environment' policies. The COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted the challenges migrants face, such as access to green spaces, revealing deep inequalities faced by these communities.
- Despite these growing needs, austerity measures have limited funding for integration initiatives, prompting a shift towards local, cost-effective, community-led solutions (Phillimore, 2020). In this context, the natural environment emerges as an underutilized resource for facilitating integration.
- Recent literature identifies numerous benefits for migrant people engaging with the natural environment, including in relation to wellbeing and belonging, whilst identifying barriers relating to access and discrimination (e.g., Biglin 2020; Rishbeth et al 2019; Coughlan & Hermes 2016).
- However, knowledge is unevenly dispersed across disciplines, locations, and demographic cohorts (including migration status, life stage, and ethnicity).
- Moreover, it is primarily focused on migrant experiences, often failing to meaningfully engage with multi-directional integration processes in local communities. It is here that this project intervenes: bringing together existing knowledge, addressing gaps, and translating findings into policy and practice relevant especially to a UK context.

Key findings

This research employed a rigorous, community-centric methodology that directly engaged over 300 residents across multiple locations through innovative participatory methods. This included collaborating with 6 community researchers, conducting surveys of UK-based nature-engaged integration initiatives with 66 respondents, a participatory mapping survey with 300 respondents across the London borough of Haringey (119), Blackburn with Darwen (105), and the isle of Lewis (76), 12 aesthetic workshops² with 28 participants, interviews with 8 artists, and a review of 48 artworks. Additionally, reflexive sessions³ were held with the Policy and Practice Team and Advisory Board involved in the project, supplemented by observational data. An extensive scoping review examined 138 publications, with 58 being highly relevant. This multi-pronged, interdisciplinary approach triangulated diverse data sources and stakeholder inputs to robustly capture the nuances of nature's role in integration processes.

Nature-based integration fosters relationships between humans, nature, and culture in different time periods and locations. Our project found that nature and nature engagement has a beneficial effect on the integration of various communities, including migrants, non-migrants, people with migrant backgrounds, refugees, and asylum seekers, in the following ways:

- **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. This holistic view of nature's role underscores its importance in fostering health, wellbeing, leisure pursuits and integration, aligning with relevant domains outlined in the Home Office Indicators of Integration framework (Ndofor-Tah, et al., 2019).

- **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. The Home Office Indicators of Integration framework (Ndofor-Tah, et al., 2019) stress the importance of expressing and sharing in one's own unique culture and traditions (for example, in the context of the domains of Social Bonds, Culture and Stability), linking this to feelings of confidence, security and belonging – which aid integration.
- **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 with nature needs to be nurtured, akin to building social connections, highlighting nature's role in both personal and communal integration processes. Reporting of a sense of belonging is described across various domains as an important measure in Home Office Indicators of Integration framework (Ndofor-Tah, et al., 2019), while belonging and its link with place-attachment is increasingly stressed in contemporary literature as a fundamental dynamic influencing integration (Zisakou et al, 2024).
- **Social Connections:** Contemporary integration literature stresses the importance of social connections between residents with diverse settlement histories (Strang and Quinn, 2021; Käkälä et al, 2023). Home Office Indicators of Integration framework (Ndofor-Tah, et al., 2019) also describe social connections as being key to both the definition and achievement of integration. For our research participants, nature served as a vital arena for building social connections, with its universal appeal bridging gaps between different community

² An aesthetic workshop is a participatory research method. This qualitative approach has a workshop-style set up, involving an artistic element, such as creating collages or terrariums.

³ Reflexive sessions involved both sessions where the research team and other bodies reflected on key questions and findings to feed new thoughts into the research and observations where the research team visited local natural places in our case studies reflecting on key questions around nature and integration.

segments including families, single people, people from different ethnic backgrounds and people with different accessibility needs.

- **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. For example, across our case study locales, female and migrant people were more likely to report difficulties with availability and cost of transport as well as issues around fear of antisocial harassment based on gender or ethnicity. The importance of inclusive, supportive infrastructures and programs to enhance nature accessibility was highlighted by participants and is reflected in our recommendations.

Policy Recommendations to Support Integration

Based on our findings, we provide the following recommendations.

Update the overarching strategy for community cohesion and development:

To channel the potential for nature-based integration to pursue strategic aims and carry out the specific recommendations outlined further below, the DLUHC should:

- Establish policy programmes for multi-agency collaboration among national and local stakeholders, including long-standing communities and environmental organisations, to develop intercultural and eco-social sustainable integration strategies. These programs require allocation of sustainable funding and resources to support the implementation of all dimensions of integration at the local, community, and government levels; and
- Introduce a comprehensive pilot study to implement and test nature-based integration activities with the whole of the local community, including in particular asylum seekers, refugees and migrants to boost opportunity for different intersectionalities to meet and connect via nature and evaluate integration outcomes (for instance via the Home Office Indicators of Integration). Such a study should be led by multiple agencies and stakeholders, holistic, delivered locally, and take into account migrant-led grassroots movements as well as all dimensions of social, migration, and environmental justice.

To help inform these policy approaches, the DLUHC can utilise multiagency collaborative networks and ways of working developed in previous government projects in this area, including by the Refugee Employability Programme in England⁴, and the New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy⁵, while also bringing in key national environmental actors to co-develop effective socio-environmental partnerships and policy in relevant regions of the UK.

Implement a 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:

- 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;
- Engage diverse local communities, including migrant groups, in the planning and design of natural spaces to ensure inclusivity and responsiveness to various needs; and
- Incorporate cultural elements, such as significant plants or designs, reflecting the community's heritage.

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/refugee-employability-programme-policy-statement/refugee-employability-programme-policy-statement>

⁵ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/new-scots-refugee-integration-strategy-2024/>

Support Integration Through Nature-Based Activities:

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

- Invest in and facilitate nature-based programs like community gardening projects, nature walks, and outdoor education programs to promote integration, fostering social interaction and cultural exchange; simultaneously support initiatives that use nature for language learning and cultural orientation for newcomers. Enhance these core activities by providing supplementary activities that address various community needs, such as building playgrounds or organizing homework clubs to encourage broader family participation.

Embed Cultural Practices in Integration Strategies:

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:

- Harness diverse cultural practices that are essential for the success of nature-based integration interventions. For example, by designing activities that focus on nature-based rituals and traditions (e.g. harvest festivals), folklore and storytelling (e.g. stories and legends), cultural practices related to

nature's therapeutic benefits (e.g. healing gardens), and nature-based education and awareness (e.g. workshops and exhibitions on diverse cultural perspectives on nature).

Enhance Access to Natural Spaces:

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

- Improve public transportation and pedestrian pathways for easy access to natural spaces, ensuring inclusivity for migrant people and those with mobility challenges.

Support Safety and Inclusivity in Natural Areas:

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

- 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; and
- 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.



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Additional Resources



Link to our project website



Link to report



Link to toolkit

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