

Is “nature” a policy solution to mental health in schools?



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Introduction

The UK faces a growing youth mental health crisis (*NHS, 2023; RCPsych 2025*). Schools may play a key role in preventing these difficulties from worsening.

The integration of nature-based programs (NbPs) into school settings has been proposed as a policy solution to address such mental health challenges but robust evidence is lacking (*Lomax et al., 2024*), particularly at the secondary school level.

This Sprint utilised an implementation science framework to co-produce evidence on NbPs in secondary schools with stakeholders including policymakers from the Government’s Department for Education (DfE), young people, and educators.

Using a range of methodologies we are evaluating effectiveness, amplifying stakeholder voices, and creating actionable, evidence-based education policy insights.

Methods

This Sprint uses four approaches to create actionable evidence:

1. A scoping review on school-based NbPs for students aged 10-18, focusing on mental health outcomes.
2. Semi structured interviews with educators to elicit perspectives on the implementation of NbPs in schools across the UK.
3. Development of a cost-benefit evaluation framework to enable schools and policymakers to assess the value of NbPs.
4. A deliberative policy workshop with all stakeholders (DfE policymakers, young people, and educators) to collaboratively explore whether NbPs can improve mental health and wellbeing in secondary schools and to co-create policy recommendations.

Translating evidence into policy requires a structured approach to ensure research findings are both relevant and actionable (*Troiano et al., 2024*). All stages outlined above were co-created with stakeholders throughout the conceptualisation, strategy, and dissemination phases.

Outcomes

There is some preliminary evidence that NbPs in schools enhance student well-being, reduce anxiety, foster peer connections, and develop leadership skills. Educators report renewed motivation, improved teaching effectiveness, and better student engagement.

At a broader level, NbPs may boost school attendance, strengthen community ties, and promote pro-environmental behaviours.

Challenges: Key barriers include resource limitations, exam pressures, peer stigma, safeguarding and risk management concerns, budget constraints, lack of green spaces, inconsistent pedagogy, and insufficient school support. There remains a notable lack of high-quality evidence at the secondary school level.

Next Steps: Policy support and funding are essential for overcoming these challenges and ensuring equitable access to NbPs. Findings from this Sprint will be shared in a policy brief with actionable recommendations for decision-makers.

Iterative co-creation process with stakeholders

