

Health and wellbeing and nature recovery

How might the Nature Recovery Strategy contribute to wider health determinants and achieving a connection with nature?



Developing the County's Local Nature Recovery Strategy

Nature improves our wellbeing

Countless scientific studies have shown the link between connection with nature and wellbeing, through reducing blood pressure, heart rate, muscle tension, and the production of stress hormones, improving sleep, better breathing, reduced depression, motivation to exercise, immune health, better vision and emotional wellness.

- 70% of UK adults agree that being close to nature improves their mood (The Mental Health Foundation, 2021).
- Spending at least 120 minutes a week in nature is associated with good health and wellbeing (Mathew P White et al., 2020)
- NHS Kent and Medway and the KCC Public Health Team recognise the importance of access to nature for the wider determinants of health through the developing Integrated Care Strategy.

Everyone has the capacity to connect with nature

Access to nature is important for all (Miles Richardson et al., 2019). However, mental health benefits from connecting with nature may vary by socioeconomic status, residential location, occupation, disability, culture, gender, and age. Many people face barriers to accessing and benefitting from nature.



Does the quality of our green spaces matter for wellbeing?

According to an evidence briefing from Natural England on the links between natural environments and physical health:

- Currently there is only a small amount of evidence of the influence of the type or quality of environment on health outcomes.
- Typically, studies have focused on the amount or proximity of generic natural environments around the home without seeking to differentiate between different environment types.
- What evidence does exist suggests that high quality (both in terms of ecological quality and maintenance) greenspaces are associated with better outcomes.



Nature and wellbeing - the current picture in Kent and Medway

There is excellent nature/wellbeing work happening across Kent and Medway, from the almost unintended health benefits coming from local conservation volunteering groups to more formalised Green Social Prescribing projects.

There is interest and appetite in the county from green and health sectors to collaborate, develop and improve the county-wide offer.

The challenges we face include:

- Provision of green space, or GSP activities does not always correspond to areas of population need; a mapping exercise is needed to establish where efforts and resources would be best placed.
- Lack of county-wide strategic direction – current nature/wellbeing work has evolved in pockets.
- Clear, county-wide mechanism for linking the health and green sectors is needed.
- Lack of long-term funding options for nature/wellbeing projects can cause a stop-start situation.



The Kent and Medway Green Social Prescribing Network

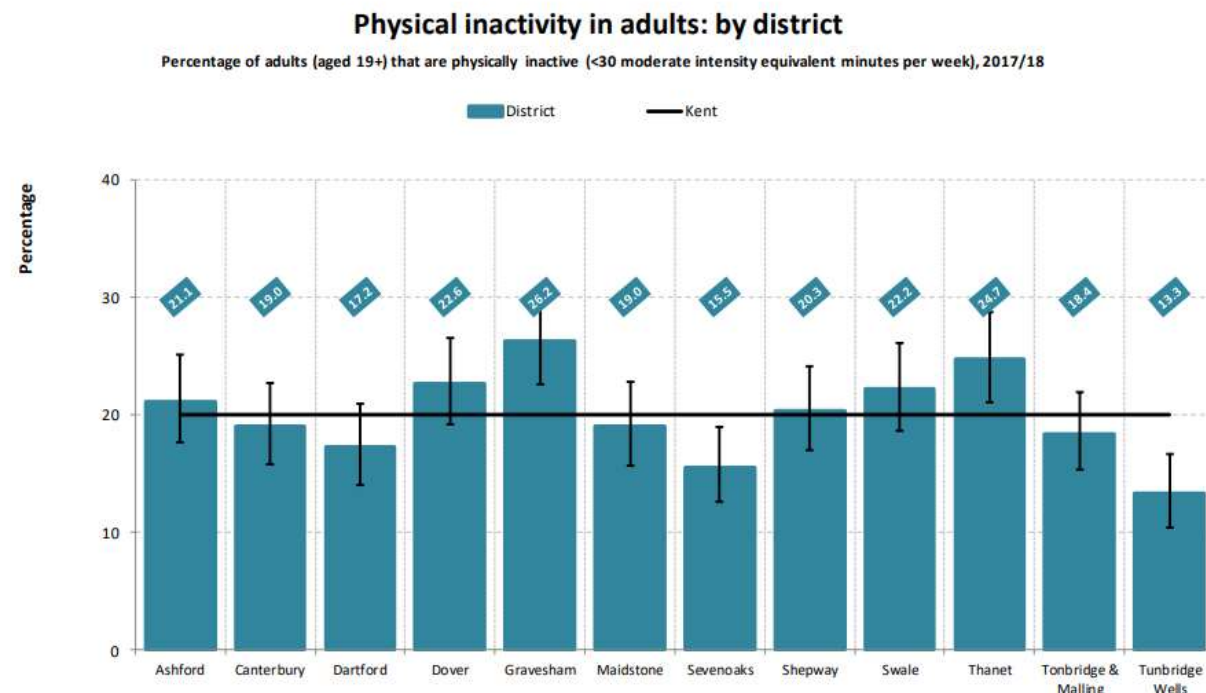
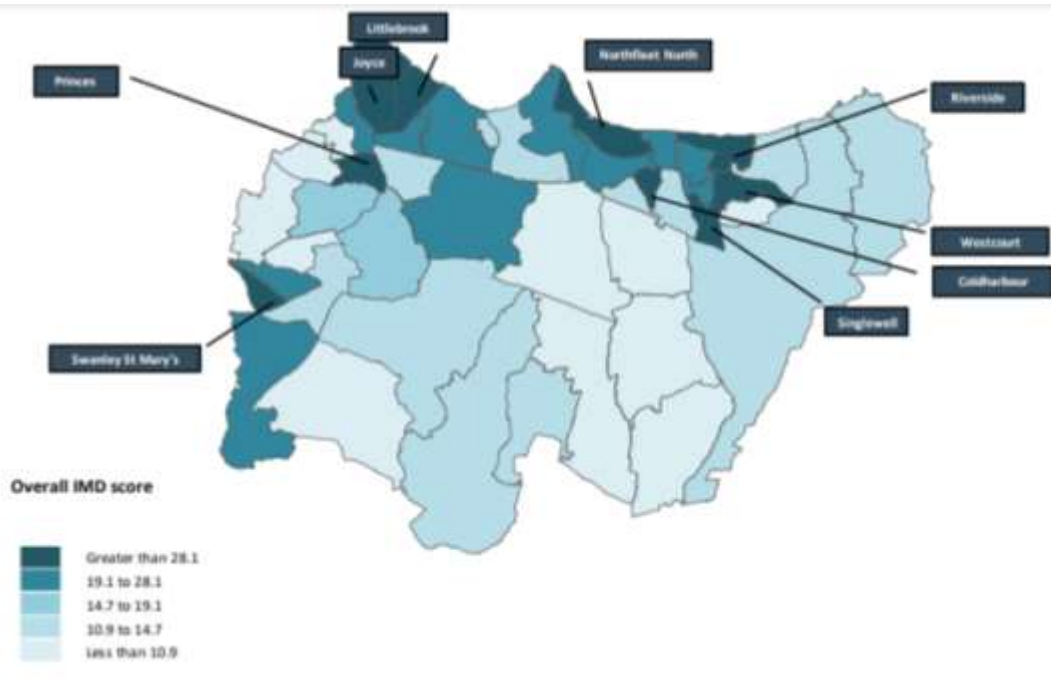
Formed in 2020, meeting regularly since 2022. Aims to:

- Champion Green Social Prescribing and its benefits in Kent and Medway
- Maintain strong links of collaboration and communication between the health sector, green sector and local government
- Become a source of “Best Practice” guidance for Green Social Prescribing projects
- Identify and develop opportunities for fund raising and delivery for Green Social Prescribing in Kent and Medway
- Carry out research and share data on the importance of nature connection and quality of green space related to wellbeing outcomes
- Develop and maintain links with Green Social Prescribing projects taking place nationally; learn and collaborate
- Work to ensure that Green Social Prescribing is available to all in Kent and Medway, and champion diversity among the Network



What evidence do we have around health needs?

Kent Public Health Observatory's Health and Social Care Map system is a tool to present information about the health and wellbeing of people in Kent.



It is possible to compare areas, view trends and see differences by deprivation using the interactive dashboards. It includes district and borough councils as well as health care partnerships.

Could the LNRS provide the “green” information to match?

Making Space for Nature Kent and Medway: How might the Nature Recovery Strategy contribute to wider health determinants and achieving a connection with nature?

- The LNRS is an opportunity for strategic, collaborative working between the green and health sectors; an opportunity to make better use of our shared resources and knowledge on a county-wide scale.
- The spatial nature of the LNRS presents the opportunity for cross-sector data collection and evidence building, for example around the importance of quality of greenspace for health outcomes or providing greenspace data to link to the Health and Social Care maps. By combining our evidence and data across sectors, we can measure the impact of natural solutions in a way that health professionals can use. In addition, we can identify strengths and gaps in nature provision across the county.
- The LNRS area matches that of NHS Kent and Medway Integrated Care Board. This could create the potential to align the NHS plans and priorities with the Local Nature Recovery Strategy.
- With such a wide range of partners and stakeholders, there is the opportunity to address some of the barriers to accessing nature and improve equality of access – to build on the work that is already happening through partners on a county-wide scale.

“How connecting with nature benefits our mental health” (Mental Health Foundation, 2021)

Policy recommendations from the study:

1. Facilitating connection with nature
2. Protecting the natural environment and restoring biodiversity
3. Improving access to nature
4. Using the planning system and urban design to improve the visibility and availability of nature in every local area
5. Making green spaces safe for all
6. Developing a life-long relationship with nature

Could the LNRS do all of this?



The link between nature and wellbeing

“A thriving, wildlife-rich environment benefits both physical and mental health. People with nature on their doorstep are more active, mentally resilient and have better all-round health”. (The Wildlife Trusts)



The better our natural environment, the better our health will be.

Thank you