

February 2026



Nature Towns and Cities



**Principles for
engaging people
with nature**



Natural England is developing a set of engagement principles and standards, to support organisations delivering nature projects in communities.

Drawing on extensive research and co-design with partners and community organisations, they are intended to help deliver better outcomes for people and nature, where they live.

The principles are currently being tested with 12 community projects across England, with a final version set to be published and embedded this year. The standards are under development with the support of partners and will be published in due course.

This document sets out the principles at late draft stage, to support places gathering evidence for Level 1: Foundation accreditation. They are designed to be used in the order that's most appropriate for your town or city.



Understand communities

Ensure existing activity is supported and enhanced.

Support areas of need

Target areas and communities most likely to benefit from social or environmental support.

Co-design and co-develop

Work with communities to identify opportunities and ideas that meet their needs and priorities.

Community engagement in nature

Take a sustainable approach

Consider long-term support and funding – private and public – from the start.

Evaluate your work

Review ways of working to understand how they enable different outcomes.

Support areas of need

Target areas and communities that will benefit most from support that addresses health inequalities and Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) needs.¹

This is based on a range of considerations and can be adapted to meet the priorities of funders and partners.

Considerations include:

- o Equitable access to quality greenspace – a data-driven approach utilising Natural England’s [Green Infrastructure mapping tool](#)
- o The six policy objectives outlined in the ‘Fair Society, Healthy Lives’ paper (The Marmot Review 2010)²
- o Tackling racism, discrimination and their outcomes and supporting equitable opportunities for everyone to engage in nature and green space.³



Understand communities

You should work with local organisations to:

- o Understand existing provision and community assets
- o Confirm and refine targeting focussing on places with the most to gain
- o Identify potential green / nature solutions that best meet community needs and priorities.

Take an asset-based approach, developing an understanding of the existing community provision and activity across different interests (e.g. accessible parks for environmental interests, libraries and museums for culture, playing fields for sport and GP surgeries for health).

Ask the community what matters the most to them and work with them to ensure existing activity is supported and enhanced, rather than displaced. Understand the barriers to different communities accessing nature and work together to overcome them. Examples of barriers could be physical, financial or social.

Share learnings from other places, so that best practice is embedded from the start.



Co-design and co-develop with communities

At the heart of the principles is working inclusively to create sustainable ways for the whole community to connect with nature and integrate these ways of working into policy and practice.

This means communities identifying opportunities and ideas that meet their own needs and priorities. Support for communities should be to co-design, co-develop and co-create what's needed locally and not to achieve individual (external) organisational outputs. This requires collaboration with partners from across the community and different delivery sectors beyond the environment.

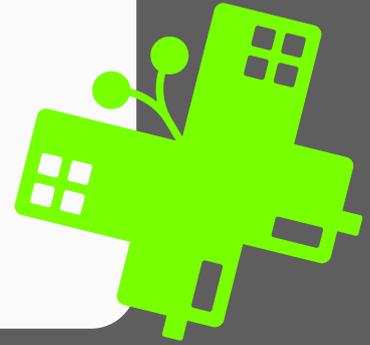
Genuine collaboration between communities and their partners needs to happen at the start of project planning and be evidence-based. It should be ongoing to achieve outcomes that meet the needs of communities and individuals as projects evolve.



Take a sustainable approach

Take a sustainable approach to funding and utilise community assets, incorporating an ethical, blended funding model with sustainable funding plans considered and developed from the start.

Consider how you might approach an offer to grow local skills, employability and employment opportunities where possible.⁴



Evaluate your work

It is important to understand what is needed to support communities to achieve their aspirations, and to determine the most helpful way of measuring benefits and outcomes to understand what works best. Work towards keeping evaluation approaches proportionate to the size of the project and accessible to all participants so that everyone's voice is heard.

Where possible, use standardised indicators and metrics to understand the impact across a diverse range of activities.

Evaluation needs are likely to evolve. Consider how to learn from and scale up what works, and how to keep pace with changing political and community priorities.



Footnotes

- ¹ Natural England – Access to Evidence, 2022, 'The Included Outside Publication Series'
- ² Institute of Health Equity - The Marmot Review, February 2010, 'Fair Society Healthy Lives' fair-society-healthy-lives-full-report-pdf.pdf
- ³ Wildlife and Countryside Link, October 2022, Route Map Towards Greater Ethnic Diversity' WCL_Route_map_towards_greater_ethnic_diversity_October_2022.pdf
- ⁴ E.g. Groundwork, 'New to Nature' New to Nature - Groundwork

If you require an alternative format, or if you have questions for the team behind this guide, please email us on info@naturetownsandcities.org.uk



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