



# Review Summary – Enabling and Encouraging Access to Woodlands for Diverse Publics

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## Introduction

This literature review is part of the wider Understanding Public Access to Woodlands project, which is funded by the UK Government through Defra's Nature for Climate Fund programme. This document summarises a review of literature on the benefits, barriers, and enablers of public access to woodland, as well as considering previous access interventions and their legacies. It also explores literature on the meaning of access to woodland. Highlighting the key points and gaps in existing literature allows us to better prioritise the aims of future research. The literature search focused on academic and grey literature on access to woodlands.

## Topics

Benefits of public access to woodlands are broad and include improvements to physical and mental health (Gittins et al., 2023). Woodlands are understood to constitute therapeutic landscapes (Foley, 2020; Gesler, 1992) and their relaxing qualities have been found to extend across different ethnic groups (Edwards, Larson, & Church, 2022). Benefits of public access to woodland further include connection to nature and education about the importance of the environment. Early years engagement with woodlands is positively correlated with future access and ensuing physical and mental health benefits (Hegetschweiler et al., 2022; O'Brien & Murray, 2007; Thompson et al., 2008). There is strong evidence for the benefits of public access to woodland. Thus, it is pertinent for researchers and policymakers to consider the numerous factors that act as barriers to public access to these landscapes, and to work towards their resolution, so that the benefits of woodland access can be extended to all. These barriers are interlinked and hard to disentangle and thus require research that utilises methodologies capable of capturing and examining complexity.

The review found more literature exploring the barriers than literature suggesting what would better enable public access. The following section explores commonly

noted barriers and where they exist, related interventions and highlighted enablers that might help overcome barriers.

## 1. Poor health

It is not clear in the literature what 'poor health' encompasses or how it has been determined. Despite a lack of clarity on definition and determination, literature that does broadly reflect on public access and 'poor health' states that those in poor health, particularly those who are from ethnic minority groups and are older and female, are less likely to use greenspace inclusive of woodland (Boyd et al., 2018). Research by Public Health Scotland has linked long-term illness, housing status, income, and poor health to lack of greenspace use (Public Health Scotland, 2022). Research has attributed the 'abandonment of forests' by frequent users to neurological illness such as dementia (Thalén et al., 2022), but further work is needed to understand why this occurs.

### COVID-19 and long COVID

Visits to forests and woodland have been found to be more resilient to COVID-19 restrictions than other nature spaces<sup>1</sup>. Young people (16-24) reported being more motivated to access forests for mental wellbeing and exercise during this time. It found that those who were already active in all age-groups became more active, while inactive people (those doing less than 30 minutes activity a week) decreased physical activity further during the pandemic. Those who were categorized as vulnerable during the pandemic used woodlands less due to fears of overcrowding and disease transmission. There is no literature that explores whether the ongoing health impacts of COVID-19 and long-COVID have had a lasting impact on public access to woodlands.

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<sup>1</sup> [Engagement with nature and Covid-19 restrictions \(forestresearch.gov.uk\)](https://forestresearch.gov.uk)

## Interventions, enablers and gaps

An intervention assessment in Scotland found that engaging people suffering from early-stage dementia with nature via woodland-based activities including woodland walks, bird box building, tree identification, and woodland cooking, had positive mental well-being benefits<sup>2</sup>. Woodlands provided positive stimulation and allowed those with dementia to feel connected and part of the community. Besides dementia, the literature review found no evidence exploring how specific diseases act as barriers to woodland access. Nor did it find any further literature or examples of interventions to improve access for those in poor health.

## 2. Physical Disability

Physical disability was one of the top eight reasons self-selected by individuals in the People and Nature survey for not accessing greenspace inclusive of woodland (Boyd et al., 2018). This finding was highlighted by the authors as an area requiring further study as the reasons for this are not well researched or understood (ibid).

## Interventions, enablers and gaps

The Barnwood Trust and Local Nature Partnership's Access to Nature project in Gloucestershire began a workshop series in 2023 to better understand institutional barriers that prevent long-term access of publics with disabilities to nature, including woodlands. A comparative study on the preferences of disabled people in wheelchairs for recreational woodland trails found highest usability attributed to asphalt, concrete and cobblestone surfaces and lowest usability attributed to wooden surfaces (Janeczko et al., 2016). The study suggests that access can be better enabled by ensuring surfaces are suitable for wheelchair users. Besides this

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<sup>2</sup> Forest Research (2015) Forests as place of mental well-being for people with dementia [fcrn019.pdf](#) ([forestresearch.gov.uk](#))

work, the review found no literature on interventions and enablers and thus large gaps remain on access to woodland for those with disabilities.

### 3. Distance to woodland and quality of woodland space

The time taken to reach greenspace areas and the level of neglect act as the most important determinants of access (Dallimer et al., 2014; Žlender & Ward Thompson, 2017), with proximity, freedom from rubbish, and good directional signs and information boards making the greatest difference to people accessing local woodlands (Ward Thompson et al., 2005). Infrequent users care more about the quality of woodland space and nature, whereas frequent users care less as their motivations are more often related to exercise (Dallimer et al., 2014). Expanding and regenerating woodland in the Thames Chase Community Forest was found to most improve access for individuals in areas of below average deprivation highlighting that distance continues to act as more of a barrier for those in deprived areas (Kessel et al., 2009).

Transport and its cost are a related barrier to distance. The Young, Green, and Well report found that 'the fiscal cost and time investment in transport inhibited some respondents from visiting green spaces, especially young people dependent on public transport' (Parks for London, 2022:36). Lack of public transport and parking costs were also highlighted as barriers to ongoing engagement with Active Forest Programme in Forests in England (O'Brien & Forster, 2020).

#### Interventions, enablers and gaps

Assessing public preferences for different facilities in terms of pathways, benches, and parks across three forest sites in England, (Doick et al., 2013) found that preferences were distinct to user groups and that small changes in facility provision could increase the appeal of woodland to a wider demographic (ibid:12). An

evidence review by Hall et al. (2023) discusses literature on how publics perceive and are impacted by different species of trees and tree cover in woodland settings. They note a preference for mixed forest stands over monocultures, and for woodlands which are neither under nor 'over' managed – allowing such spaces to feel both safe and natural (2023:35). That said, other research has found no correlation between quality, understood as tree cover and condition and tree or animal species, and frequency of access. (Dallimer et al. 2014). This raises questions over what is defined as quality, and what quality of woodland means to different publics. Recognising the barrier posed by distance, the UK Government's [Environmental Improvement Plan](#) released in 2023 aims for everyone in England to live within a 15-minute walk of green or blue space, which includes woodland. It is unclear exactly how this will be achieved and how its impacts in terms of increasing public access to woodland will be measured.

#### 4. Socioeconomic background

Adults from lower socio-economic status in deprived areas with less greenspace, constitute infrequent users of woodland (Boyd et al., 2018). Those who access woodlands as children tend to be from higher socioeconomic backgrounds (Thompson et al., 2008) and thus the legacy of childhood access is a barrier for those from lower economic backgrounds and areas. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Public Health Scotland found that social housing tenants accessed greenspace far less than private renters or homeowners, and that children in social housing and children living in low-income households or with no access to outside green space also visited green space less than other groups (Public Health Scotland, 2022). Those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds experience barriers to access in terms of costs associated with woodlands. This included more commonly acknowledged costs such as transport and parking, but also footwear such as walking boots, coats, and other apparel<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> [Countryside: Who really has access to the great outdoors? - BBC News](#)

## Interventions, enablers and gaps

Providing apparel and recreational equipment like pedal bikes can enable access for those from lower-socioeconomic backgrounds<sup>1</sup>. An intervention assessment explored whether physical changes to woodlands and community engagement activities in Scotland would have positive mental health outcomes for those in deprived urban communities (Ward Thompson et al., 2019). The intervention increased overall visits to woodlands, moderate physical activity, and nature connectedness and social cohesion. However, interventions correlated with increased stress compared to control sites. Those living >500 metres from sites recorded the greatest stress the cause of which was not explored. This demonstrates the importance of intervention assessments as there are 'challenges in evidencing the effectiveness of green space and forestry interventions to enhance health in urban environments' (ibid:1).

## 5. Age and time

Children in urban areas are less aware of nature-rich green space such as woodland, and spent less time there than in urban green space such as parks (Zhang et al., 2021). Teenagers access woodlands less than adults and do so for physical exercise whereas adults are reported to visit more for mental wellbeing (Hegetschweiler et al., 2022). Where teenagers do access woodlands, their exercising of freedom in these spaces is poorly received by other age groups (Bell et al., 2003) and young adults feel that health and safety legislation and 'litigation culture' poses barriers to their accessing potentially risky but enjoyable play spaces such as woodlands (Milligan & Bingley, 2007).

Time availability is a common barrier to woodland access (Boyd et al., 2018; Winter et al., 2019) and is correlated with lifestyle and life course events that occur for people of different ages. Factors such as long work hours and caring responsibilities limit access to woodland (O'Brien, 2019).

## Interventions, enablers and gaps

Childhood access to woodland is associated with use of woodland later in life (Thompson et al., 2008) and Forest Schools have been associated with greater environmental familiarity and related skills (O'Brien & Murray, 2007). 'Mission Invertebrate'<sup>4</sup> run by the Royal Parks in London worked to increase access by educating the public about the importance of invertebrates and involving them in monitoring activities. This has had a particular focus on including school-age children but has also engaged adult learners. In 2020 the project included virtual talks and craft sessions with over 3,000 viewers, while education centre sessions at the Royal Parks saw a 66% increase in student and teacher visitors between January-March 2020. Mission Invertebrate has not released an impact statement since 2020 so it is not clear the long-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on this intervention or its long-term legacy. Active Forests found that spare time is an enabler of woodland access, with those who work shorter hours, have grown up children, or are retired, having time to access woodlands more frequently (O'Brien, 2019).

## 6. Gender

A large-scale study across adults in England found that women were less likely to access woodlands than men in general (Boyd et al., 2018). A study conducted in New York's forests and greenspaces found that women preferred landscaped park areas to forested spaces, perceiving the latter as not safe or accessible for themselves or their children (Sonti et al., 2020). A study conducted with young adults between 16 and 21 in the North-West of England relayed young women's fears of lack of visibility in woodlands and becoming victims of assault or attack. (Milligan & Bingley, 2007).

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<sup>4</sup> [Mission Invertebrate - The Royal Parks](#)

## Interventions, enablers and gaps

While not focusing explicitly on access to woodland, a Sport England funded campaign titled 'This Girl Can' began in 2015 trying to encourage more girls and women aged 14-40 to engage in sport. The most recent developments of the campaign have been a collaboration with the exercise app Strava in 2022 to encourage more engagement in outdoor space, and in February 2023 the campaign has begun its work addressing barriers for women noting that activities need to be social, self-affirming, suitable and safe. One year after the campaigns inception, 2.8 million women aged between 14-40 said they had done some, or more activity, as a result of the campaign. While the campaign has continued, no further impact assessment has been found by this review. The review did not find any literature on LGBTQ+ publics and access to woodlands or interventions in relation to men.

## 7. Ethnic Minorities

Studies have demonstrated multiple barriers to access for ethnic minority groups including distance to woodland (Ferguson et al., 2018), being under-represented in woodland environments (Natural England 2010, Winter et al., 2019), feeling unwelcome and/or excluded (Armstrong & Greene, 2022), and fearing discrimination (ibid) including violence (Burgess, 1996). Lack of time, money, transport and in particular 'lack of interest' have been found to be higher among ethnic minority groups (Winter et al., 2019) and 'may be reflective of more subtle aspects of discrimination' (ibid:12). A study with fourteen Muslim community-leaders in England found further barriers including a lack of inclusive imagery, insufficient facilities for social gathering, prior experiences of discrimination and unfamiliarity with the area (Edwards, Larson, & Burdsey, 2022).

## Interventions, enablers and gaps

A study of Protected Areas in the UK has argued that the institutional factors contributing to barriers for minority groups remain underexplored (Edwards & Larson, 2022). The study advocates organisations directly targeting minority ethnic

groups, highlighting the social benefits of Protected Area use, and moving beyond the 'Anglo-normative lens' that has governed Protected Area management. This, they argue, would enable an embracing of diversity and inclusion in protected areas inclusive of woodlands. (ibid).

In 2023 the Brecon Beacons National Park Authority in Wales appointed four members that represent black, disabled, and LGBTQ+ backgrounds to help ensure minorities are made to feel welcome and safe<sup>5</sup>. A project run by Walk the Plank in Salford, titled 'green space dark skies' ran a program in 2022 to improve access to Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, recognising 'these are places anyone can visit, any time, for free. But we know not everybody feels welcome.' The project used creative methods, where individuals each hold one light as part of a large art installation to encourage access as something inclusive and diverse<sup>6</sup>. A further intervention, the 'Nature Visuals' project by Natural England, has used photographs of lesser-seen users in England's green and natural spaces to try and instil a sense of belonging and encourage further use of greenspace by underrepresented groups<sup>7</sup>.

Ethnic minority groups have utilised social media to raise awareness, advertise activities and events, share inspiration and to build relationships. Successful ethnic minority groups, such as the Black Trail Runners and The Active Inclusion Network<sup>8</sup><sup>9</sup>, have encouraged outdoor activity in green spaces among underrepresented groups. Further groups such as Flock Together, a bird watching collective, stress themselves as a Black-founded platform that encourages inclusive representation and does not want to be 'pigeonholed as a POC' group<sup>10</sup>. Inclusive group access

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<sup>5</sup> [Diversity: Brecon Beacons aims to welcome more people - BBC News](#)

<sup>6</sup> [Green Space Dark Skies | Home](#)

<sup>7</sup> [Nature visuals: Diversity in images of England's green and natural spaces - NECR375 \(naturalengland.org.uk\)](#)

<sup>8</sup> [Active Inclusion Network \(@active.inclusion\) • Instagram photos and videos](#)

<sup>9</sup> [@activeinclusion | Linktree](#)

<sup>10</sup> [Flock Together](#). Para 3.

helps to build a sense of solidarity and access for all, breaking down barriers to woodland access.

## 8. The meaning of access

The majority of the reviewed literature on public access, including interventions and intervention assessments, take the meaning of 'access' for granted, or define it in relation to activities without detailing how that formulation of access has been reached. The review found two pieces of literature that explicitly incorporated public perceptions and meanings of access into their studies of public access to woodland. One study exploring the use of Thames Chase Community Forest in London used ethnographic research alongside quantitative data collective to show different interpretations of access (Kessel et al., 2009). Use of the forest was determined by a variety of factors including whether a person could 'imagine themselves' using such a space, different perceptions of what is actually being accessed (e.g., a place to exercise or a place to socialise), and ideas about using the countryside 'properly'. The study concluded that alongside important factors such as physical distance to green space, perceptions and understandings of what is being accessed and how it should be used had a large impact on woodland engagement.

A later longitudinal study considering how an intervention to improve access had changed behaviours revealed shifts in perceived access to woods, especially the different ways that woods or nature had come to (or back to) participants' 'radars' (Gittins et al., 2023). The study highlights the different ways in which access came to be experienced and realised. For some being 'introduced' to woodlands opened their eyes to something new, raising awareness that woodlands could be spaces for wellbeing. The study noted that perceptions during the intervention shifted for some participants who began to see woodlands as 'a space for me' – with access being understood as something personal, and a feeling of becoming 'at home' in woodland.

## Research aims and focus

This literature review is part of the wider Understanding Public Access to Woodlands project, which funded by the UK Government through Defra’s Nature for Climate Fund programme. Having noted the key points and gaps in existing literature, this research contributes evidence towards three key areas. Firstly, it will explore barriers to access for marginalised publics who are underrepresented in woodland spaces, especially in relation to the gaps in evidence identified in this review. Secondly, it works to keep in focus and interrogate the multiple meanings of access to woodland for different marginalised publics. Thirdly, it works to better understand the legacy of interventions that have sought to improve access, particularly for marginalised publics.

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