

Scottish Natural Heritage

Developing the contribution of the natural heritage to a healthier Scotland



Contents

Section	Page
Summary	1
SNH's Approach	3
Background and context	8

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Developing the contribution of the natural heritage to a healthier Scotland

Summary

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- 1 The natural heritage makes an important contribution to people's physical and mental health and well-being. This contribution can be strengthened through a range of action to support:
 - increased physical activity and contact with nature in the outdoors; and
 - better planning, design and management of places to provide accessible, high quality greenspace, path networks and attractive landscapes close to where people live, work and learn.
- 2 In its accessibility, quality and diversity, Scotland's natural heritage is an important resource for improving public health and well-being. As a nation, we should be making more use of this resource to address some of the important physical and mental health issues in Scotland today, and to encourage more active and sustainable lifestyles more generally.
- 3 SNH will enhance the contribution of the natural heritage to a healthier Scotland through action to increase participation in enjoying the outdoors through recreation, volunteering and outdoor learning, and to support the provision of local greenspace, path networks and attractive landscapes. We will work closely with the health sector and other key stakeholders to further mainstream this activity in delivering health outcomes and to ensure that we are helping to address disadvantage and reduce health inequalities.



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SNH's Approach



Introduction

- 1 The contribution that outdoor activity and contact with nature can make to a healthier Scotland is increasingly recognised by the medical profession and policy makers more generally. Increasing the proportion of adults enjoying the outdoors each week is now a key target of the Scottish Government¹, while other relevant indicators in the National Performance Framework include reducing the percentage rate of increase in children's body mass index; improving adults' mental well-being and increasing healthy life expectancy in deprived areas.
- 2 SNH's corporate strategy identifies 'Delivering Health and Well-being' as one of our five key priorities. Key actions to deliver this include: greater and wider participation in enjoying the outdoors through recreation, volunteering and learning; adequate good quality greenspace in towns; and greater involvement by communities in managing their local environment including the landscapes around them. Against this background, this statement sets out SNH's perspective on the contribution of the natural heritage to a healthier Scotland and the specific actions we propose to undertake to develop this.

1. National Performance Indicator 41, see www.scotland.gov.uk/About/scotPerforms/indicators/visitOutdoors



The contribution of the natural heritage to a healthier Scotland

- 3 'Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity' (World Health Organisation, 1948). The basic 'ecosystem services' provided by the environment - clean air, water quality and regulation, food and security² - have long been recognised as fundamental for public health. In Britain and other parts of Europe, there has also been a long-standing interest in the role of urban greenspaces and countryside recreation in providing physical and mental health benefits and improving social conditions³. Recent reviews of research now highlight the following main links between physical and mental health and the natural heritage.⁴

- **Physical activity through 'Green exercise'**

Being active outdoors, through informal recreation, leisure activities, pastimes, play, volunteering and learning in the outdoors, can play an important role in improving people's physical and mental health.

- **Natural contribution to effective recovery**

The natural heritage can have important 'restorative qualities' and thus promote recovery from physical and mental stresses. Experience of the natural heritage, and involvement in its care, can improve the mental health and well-being of individuals by helping recharge their physical, mental and social capacities.

- **The outdoors as preventative medicine**

Contact with nature can help protect us from future stresses and aid mental concentration. Just being outdoors during the day can bring benefits in terms of mental and physical health, and can help people guard against illness.

- **Wider social health and well-being benefits**

The natural heritage is associated with wider social health and well-being benefits – experience of the natural heritage and involvement in its care can lead to stronger more inclusive and sustainable communities.

- **Young people and sustained benefits**

There is potential to encourage healthier lifestyles by stimulating positive interest in the natural world and encouraging outdoor activity at a young age.

Encouraging regular outdoor activity and contact with nature can bring about a range of physical, mental and social health benefits.

- 4 The extent and significance of the health and well-being benefits from the natural heritage is dependent on the individual, the activity undertaken and the qualities of the setting itself.

In its accessibility, quality and diversity, Scotland's natural heritage is an important resource for improving public health and well-being. As a nation, we should be making more use of this resource to address some of the important physical and mental health issues in Scotland today.

- 5 The contribution of the natural heritage can be strengthened through a range of action to support:
- increased physical activity and contact with nature in the outdoors; and
 - better planning, design and management of places to provide accessible, high quality greenspace, path networks and attractive landscapes close to where people live, work and learn.

2. For a fuller description of ecosystem services, see www.millenniumassessment.org.

3. See for example Chapter 2, Health Impact Assessment of greenspace - NHS Health Scotland, greenspace Scotland, SNH and IoOM (2008)

4. An overview of the evidence base for these links is described in a SNH working paper (May 2009). See also: Greenspace Scotland (2008) The Links between greenspace and health: a critical literature review, Greenspace Scotland, NHS Health Scotland and SNH; Newton, Julie (2007) Well-being and the Natural Environment – a brief overview of the evidence, DEFRA; Bird, William (2007) Natural Thinking – investigating the links between the natural environment, biodiversity and mental health, RSPB; Davies Pat (2007) A pathway to health – a descriptive systematic review, CCW; Pretty J, Griffin M, Peacock J, Hine R, Sellens M, South M, University of Essex (2005) A Countryside for Health and Well-being – The Physical and Mental Benefits of Green Exercise Countryside Recreation Network.

The natural heritage as a health resource

The individual

- Outdoor activity offers everyone an opportunity to discover new interests, explore new places and learn more about the natural world.
- Many people enjoy the challenge, fun, and opportunity to do something different offered by the outdoor environment.
- Most outdoor activities can be group-based, and the social health and well-being elements of these activities can be as important as the direct health benefits.
- For some people, regular exercise outdoors is easier to keep up than in formal places such as gyms or clubs, because of the pleasure they have from being in a natural environment, such as a wood, park or nature reserve.

The activity

- Participation is free, or relatively inexpensive, and there are a wide range of activities to choose from to suit all.
- Challenging activities, such as mountain biking and kayaking, are increasingly popular, and appeal to many children and young people.
- Growing your own food, conservation volunteering or active travel offer a different kind of exercise, with the added bonus of achieving something worthwhile.
- Taking part in activities in the relaxed, non-threatening atmosphere provided by greenspace can benefit people with a whole range of mental health conditions.

The setting

- Accessible and well-managed local greenspace and path networks are a key resource for outdoor activity, contact with nature and more active lifestyles.
- Nature reserves and National, Regional and Country Parks are an attractive focus for walks and other activities.
- Scotland's 'wild places', such as mountains, forests and coasts, are an opportunity to get away from the stresses of modern lives, and can provide challenge, adventure and exploration.
- Well-designed school grounds and visits to local greenspaces and outdoor education centres provide a stimulating setting for learning across the curriculum, and improve the health and well-being of young people.

Action to promote and sustain healthier lifestyles is particularly important close to home⁵, and can also support action on climate change⁶

- 6 The circumstances in which people are born, grow, live, work, and age are important drivers of health, and health inequality. Good planning and design – so that places are 'healthy' in all senses of the word – can therefore bring about a range of social, economic and environmental benefits for individuals and local communities. Better local provision of opportunities to enjoy, experience and learn more about the natural world can help contribute to more active and fulfilling lives. Encouraging walking and cycling for local journeys can support action to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases by providing alternatives to car use and can encourage healthier lifestyles for everyone.

5. See Enjoying the Outdoors –supporting participation and sharing the benefits (SNH, 2007)

6. E.g. Healthy Environment Network (May 2008) Position paper on Environment and Health: identifying the priorities. <http://www.healthscotland.com/resources/networks/healthy-environment/HEN-reports.aspx>

The outdoors begins on your doorstep. Stronger emphasis is required in settlement planning, neighbourhood design and the management of local greenspace, path networks and countryside to ensure that the places we live, work and learn in provide for more regular contact with nature and encourage active travel on foot or bike. To help address health inequalities and encourage healthier lifestyles, targeting of action on disadvantaged communities and groups, and for children and young people, is needed.

- 7 The 2008 guidelines from the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) on “Promoting and creating built and natural environments that encourage and support physical activity” show that policy makers have recognised the importance of access to and enjoyment of well designed and managed natural environments in improving public health. However, the guidelines emphasise that the evidence base for specific cause-effect relationships and policy interventions could be much better, especially if evaluation techniques were more rigorous and applied consistently.

While the evidence base for action now exists, some of these links and their implications for policy design and delivery need further development.

What is SNH’s role and what are our priorities?

- 8 Alongside its conservation functions, SNH has statutory responsibilities for facilitating public enjoyment of the natural heritage and promoting awareness and understanding of the right of responsible access. A particular priority in this work is action to improve provision, promotion and use of paths and greenspace close to home. We are also charged by Scottish Government for reporting on NPI 41, and more generally for helping to champion and lead effort on increasing participation in enjoying the outdoors through recreation, volunteering and outdoor learning. We do this through research and policy development; advice to national and local government; developing best practice on our National Nature Reserves and with partners; grants to third sector organisations and communities; and through campaigns and information.
- 9 We believe that the Scottish Government’s objectives for a healthier Scotland will be more achievable if people have regular opportunities for enjoying the outdoors for exercise, relaxation, learning and active travel. The promotion of this stronger outdoor culture requires a concerted and long-term range of action in various settings, including in and around school or nursery, at work, and close to home. To help address the significant health inequalities that exist, targeting of effort on certain groups of people and specific parts of Scotland is also required.

SNH can help improve public health and well-being through its work to increase participation in the enjoyment and care of the natural heritage and to support the better provision of local greenspace, path networks and attractive landscapes. We need to work more closely with the health sector to further mainstream this activity in delivering health outcomes and to ensure that we help to address disadvantage and reduce health inequalities.

- 10 To further the contribution of the natural heritage to improving public health and well-being, the key priorities for SNH are:
 - i) To increase understanding and awareness of the contribution of the natural heritage to health and well-being;
 - ii) To develop closer links in SNH policy and advice between the natural heritage and improved health and well-being; and
 - iii) To take forward more activity on participation and place-making with more explicit and measurable health and well-being outcomes

The main activities for take forward implementation of these priorities are set out in Table 1 below. We will work closely and in partnership with the Scottish Government and its agencies, local authorities and health trusts, and other key partners to deliver this work.

Table 1
Proposed SNH Activities on health and well-being

Key priorities for SNH	Main Activities
To increase awareness and understanding of the contribution of the natural heritage to health and well-being	Develop and promote key messages on health and the natural heritage to a range of audiences, including the public and health professionals
	Improve understanding of the contribution of the natural heritage to health and well-being through research, training and capacity building
	Review, report and help consolidate the evidence base
To develop closer links in SNH policy and advice between the natural heritage and improved health and well-being	Input to strategy and policy at the national and local level
	Contribute to the development of new thinking and practice through new partnerships, projects and initiatives
	Develop more explicit and measurable health and well-being outcomes from increasing participation and better place-making
To take forward more activity on participation and place-making with more explicit and measurable health and well-being outcomes	Champion and support more active and healthier lifestyles through SNH work on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● outdoor recreation, volunteering and learning; and the ● planning, design and management of places to provide accessible high quality greenspace, local and core path networks and attractive landscapes close to where people live, work and learn
	Contribute to tackling current and future health inequalities through targeted action for disadvantaged communities, equalities groups and young people

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Background and context



Introduction

- 1 Healthier Scotland is one of the five strategic objectives of the Scottish Government. In addition to tackling familiar health priorities through formal health care provision, greater recognition is being given to integrating health priorities with other agendas, to address health inequalities and to support greater individual responsibility. This shift in approach is underpinned by increasing recognition of the links between social, economic and environmental factors and health, as evidenced by the range of outcomes and indicators relevant to public health and well-being in the National Performance Framework.

Key Health Issues

- 2 Scotland has a number of long-standing and significant health issues. Of particular relevance to this policy are:
 - **Cardiovascular disease** – This remains one of the major causes of early death in Scotland and a significant contributor to health inequalities.

- **Obesity** – More than half of the population are classified as overweight, with nearly one quarter defined as obese. Obesity levels are also high and still increasing among school aged children. In 2003, obesity accounted for: nearly 500,000 cases of high blood pressure; over 50,000 cases of coronary heart disease; nearly 900 cancers; over 30,000 extra cases of type 2 diabetes; 14,000 cases of osteoarthritis and 10,000 of gout.
- **Mental health** – Depression and other affective disorders were the 5th most common group of conditions reported in GP consultations in 2005/06. Estimated daily use of antidepressant drugs by the adult population (aged 15 to 90) increased from 1.9% in 1992/93 to 8.7% in 2005/06.

3 The importance of physical activity in tackling many of these health issues is highlighted in the 2008 guidelines from the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) on “Promoting and creating built and natural environments that encourage and support physical activity”. The Scottish commentary on the NICE guidelines notes that:

Physical activity contributes to wellbeing and is essential for good health; increasing population physical activity levels will help in the prevention and management of over 20 conditions and diseases – including coronary heart disease (CHD), diabetes, cancer and obesity; and that physical activity can help to improve mental health and can help older people to maintain independent lives¹.

While physical activity reduces the risks of heart disease and other health problems, most men (over 50%) and women (over 66%) fail to achieve the recommended 30 minutes or more, at least 5 days per week, levels of physical activity. Similarly, a quarter of boys (26%) and over 1/3 of girls (37%) aged 2 – 15 years old fail to achieve the recommended 60 or more minutes of physical activity on 7 days a week.

4 Against this background, the NICE guidelines seek to maximise the potential for physical activity in the future design, planning and management of the built and natural environment. Key priorities include:

Strategies, policies and plans	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Involve local communities and experts at all stages of the development to ensure the potential for physical activity is maximised ● Ensure that planning applications for new developments always prioritise the need for people to lead physically active lives ● Assess in advance what impact the proposals are likely to have on physical activity levels
Transport	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Ensure the needs of pedestrians and cyclists are given priority when developing or maintaining streets ● Plan and provide walking and cycling routes that offer convenient, safe and attractive access to schools and other public facilities, workplaces, shops and social destinations. Ensure these routes are maintained to a high standard and form part of a comprehensive network offering multiple options
Public open spaces	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Develop and maintain public open spaces that are safe and accessible on foot, by bicycle and via public transport ● Ensure public open spaces, including public parks and coastal and forest paths, encourage people to be physically active
Schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Ensure primary school play grounds encourage varied, physically active play.

1. NHS Health Scotland (2008) Commentary on NICE Public Health Programme Guidance

These priorities are reflected in a range of Scottish Government planning guidance on open spaces, access and the provision of greenspace contained in the National Planning Framework, the National Forestry Strategy, Scottish Planning Policy Statements and Planning Advice Notes.

- 5 A significant concern in Scotland remains the long-standing health inequalities which exist between different parts of Scotland, and between different social and economic groups. People in 'disadvantaged areas' already live shorter, less healthy lives and confront chronic disease, on average, at a much earlier age than society as a whole. They also suffer poorer mental health². As improvements in public health have been achieved nationally, health inequalities have grown. Between 2000 and 2006, rates of death from coronary heart disease amongst the under 75s fell by 33% in Scotland overall, but by only 27% in the most deprived areas. Similar figures for cancer were 9% and 2%. At just 54, life expectancy for people in parts of Glasgow is now 28 years shorter than elsewhere in Scotland and even other parts of the developing world³.

What actions are Government taking to promote the contribution of the natural heritage to a healthier Scotland?

- 6 The *Better Health, Better Care: Action Plan* (December 2007) outlines Scottish Government priorities. These include: increasing healthy life expectancy in Scotland; breaking the link between early life adversity and adult disease; reducing health inequalities, particularly in the most deprived communities; reducing smoking and excessive alcohol consumption; improving mental health and well-being and reducing growth in the levels of obesity, specifically in children. As recognised in the creation of the first ever Minister for Public Health, a critical factor in tackling this complex agenda is the need for a multi-agency approach in which public, private and third sectors work together, with strong Government leadership.
- 7 *Equally Well*⁴ – the recent report and action plan of the Ministerial Task force on health inequalities has proposed that Government action on the physical environment should include 'evidence-based environmental improvements to promote healthy weight, and improving the quality of local neighbourhoods'. It also proposes that 'Government, NHS Boards and other public sector organisations should take specific steps to encourage the use and enjoyment of greenspace by all, with a view to improving health' and 'public sector organisations should provide materials, resources and training and evaluation of specific initiatives e.g. the prescription of "greenspace use" by GPs and clinical practitioners'.
- 8 The Scottish Government's *Good Places, Better Health*⁵ Implementation Plan provides a new research-based framework to help develop stronger links between environment and health policy, with emphasis on diet, lifestyle, local food production and greenspace. The initial focus of the work will be on childhood health issues - obesity, unintentional injury, asthma and mental health⁶. The contribution of Scotland's woods and forests to this agenda, and to health improvement more generally, is outlined in the FCS Woods for Health Strategy (2009).
- 9 The recent review of *Let's Make Scotland More Active*, the national physical activity strategy, now further emphasises the importance of walking and play in promoting the health sustaining levels of physical activity in Scotland⁷. The 10 year plan being developed as part of the Commonwealth Games 2014 legacy programme will be a significant driver for physical activity from next year onwards. Some £56 million is also being made available by the Scottish Government over the next three years to involve 20,000 overweight and obese children to benefit from NHS programmes

2. Scottish Government Discussion paper, Taking Forward The Government Economic Strategy: A Discussion Paper on Tackling Poverty, Inequality and Deprivation in Scotland, 2007

3. World Health Organisation – Social Determinants of Health, 2008

4. Equally Well – report of the Ministerial taskforce on health inequalities – June 2008

5. Good Places, Better Health – a new approach to environment and health in Scotland – Implementation Plan – Scottish Government, December 2008

6. Healthy Eating, Active Living: An action plan to improve diet, increase physical activity and tackle obesity (2008-2011), Scottish Government 2008

7. Let's Make Scotland More Active, Scottish Government -2003 and 2009 (review)

to address behaviour change. A particular focus at present is adolescent girls, with specially designed projects such as 'Fit for Girls' and 'Girls on the Move' aiming to increase physical activity levels in this group.

- 10 The contribution of the natural heritage and enjoyment of the outdoors to physical health and well-being is the specific focus of a number of national initiatives, including the 'Green Exercise Partnership' between NHS Health Scotland, FCS and SNH. In partnership with SNH and NHS Health Scotland, the Scottish Government is providing £3 million funding to the Paths for All Partnership between 2007 and 2010 to develop its successful Paths to Health Initiative, which currently supports over 20,000 people to take part in health walks each week. SNH and Government funding is also being provided to BTCV to extend their 'green gym' project.
- 11 Complementing the focus on physical activity, the Government's approach to improving mental health and well-being is set out in *Towards a Mentally Flourishing Scotland*⁸. This notes that the quality of the physical environment - including green space - has an important role to play in mental health improvement. Involvement in outdoor recreation, gardening, and conservation volunteering has also been shown to improve recovery from mental illness, and Scottish Government and SNH have supported a range of projects for people suffering mental health problems.

8. Towards a Mentally Flourishing Scotland – Policy and Action Plan, Scottish Government, May 2009

SNH commitment to customers

- We will ask customers for their views
- We will put things right if they go wrong
- We will give high standards of customer care
- We will publish our customer care performance

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