Climate and disability resource for local authority nature planning

A resource to support local authorities to create sustainable nature policy and projects that are equitable for Disabled people

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This document is part of a set of local authority resources developed by Bristol Climate & Nature Partnership's Climate and Disability project and the Sensing Climate research project. The Climate and Disability programme is part of the Community Climate Action Project, coordinated by Bristol Climate & Nature Partnership and funded by the National Lottery's Climate Action Fund.
The resources are designed to support local authorities to understand the impact that climate and nature projects can have on their local communities of Disabled people. The resources feature recommended actions that can be taken to make projects inclusive and just for Disabled people. As well as department-specific resources, there are also supplementary resources on co-production and inclusive engagement. We welcome any local authority to use the resources to support their work.

Introduction

There is growing interest in the potential of nature-based solutions to climate impacts, along with efforts to retrofit (particularly urban) environments with green or blue infrastructure (e.g. parks, woodlands, sustainable drainage systems - SuDS) to reduce risks of

flooding and overheating while providing opportunities for nature connection for health and wellbeing. Time spent in nature – when such opportunities are accessible – is thought to support physical activity, social interaction, relaxation and stress reduction.

To ensure that Disabled people have the opportunity to experience such benefits, it is essential to:

- **Recognise and address the barriers that prevent many Disabled people from accessing nature-based experiences** – Barriers range from physical barriers that limit presence in and movement through a space, to social and sensory barriers that undermine people's sense of safety and quality of experience whilst there, and poor provision of accessible green and blue space infrastructure in neighbourhoods with high populations of Disabled people. When the presence of green infrastructure is intended to cool urban centres and provide cool spaces in the context of heat waves, it is important that Disabled people are able to access the shade of trees safely, as well as key facilities within such settings, such as public toilets, water fountains, accessible parking etc.

- **Provide clear information in different formats about the accessibility and climate-related features of public nature settings** – including details about, for example, accessible facilities, path networks, gradients, maintenance, accessible shade, presence of water fountains etc. This information could support Disabled people to make an assessment of whether or not to visit in different weather conditions and according to their specific access needs and priorities.

- **Move beyond a focus on creating accessible nature-based solutions for Disabled people to working with Disabled people as knowledgeable agents of change** – Ensure that Disabled people are offered equitable access, in which they can both shape decisions about and get up close to nature.

- **Avoid creating new barriers via nature-based solutions –** for example, the installation of new drainage infrastructure to reduce flood risk (such as storm drains and permeable surfaces etc.) can create additional hazards for wheelchair users or long cane users.

- **Support people to cope with feelings of eco-anxiety** within wider efforts to connect people with nature (e.g. within green social prescribing activities) i.e. recognising that the nature people are connecting to is also changing and unravelling in the face of current ecological and climate crises. Ensure grants and activities to support this work are as open and accessible as possible, and cover accessibility costs, to ensure Disabled people can have agency when taking action on this area.

- **Regeneration areas to avoid the risks of 'green gentrification'** in which the 'greening' of socioeconomically marginalised urban neighbourhoods instigates gentrification, driving up the cost of living to a point where lower income residents are displaced. Disabled people are at particular risk of such displacement due to high levels of poverty through entrenched disabling barriers to employment. To avoid this, neighbourhood improvements should be inclusive and community led, rather than imposing the replacement of existing facilities with for-profit investments.



Credit: Evoke Pictures

Introducing Flynn

Flynn is a hearing aid user who has been experiencing the onset and progression of a chronic vestibular condition. Peaceful environments without fast movement or too much dappled lighting are helpful for him in reducing the risk of vertigo attacks. Flynn's favourite nearby space is an urban heathland, where the wildlife sounds are easier to tune into as there is less imposing traffic or mechanical noise than in urban parks where accessibility is more commonly considered. Flynn has recently joined a community group set up to support conservation activities in the heathland and to inform the design of a new community nature reserve that is being planned to increase tree cover in response to the local council's ecological emergency declaration. Although he has lots of knowledge to contribute, the meetings are held in venues without a hearing loop, and where people are not using a microphone to speak. They often talk over each other such that it is hard to follow. Flynn's mum was a wheelchair user before she passed away, and he is passionate about ensuring the design and management of the new nature reserve will support both biodiversity and human diversity. He is keen to contribute ideas for enabling a rich nature experience, with accessible paths and boardwalks, resting places, quiet spaces, a sheltered accessible gathering space, tactile navigation way-markers and accessible parking – but he is struggling to be heard in the planning sessions.

(Flynn is a fictional composite character taken from the real lived experiences of multiple Disabled people.)



Key questions for planning

- **Have you conducted an Equalities Impact Assessment (EqIA) on plans linked to the design, management, maintenance and use of green and blue spaces?**

- **If so:**
    - Have you considered impairment-specific effects? E.g. challenges in accessing the shade of trees or water fountains for wheelchair users, risks to people with mobility impairments of paths that become waterlogged during heavy rain etc.
    - Have you taken intersectionality into account? E.g. the risks of stigma in green and blue spaces when navigating intersectional forms of inequality, the fear of being seen as 'well enough' to be out in these spaces when financially reliant on welfare payments etc.
    - Have you worked with a pan-impairment Disabled People's Organisation (DPO) to review and feed into the EqIA to identify potential gaps?
    - Have other organisations fed in from the perspective of communities who may not specifically identify as disabled but who often experience high levels of impairment or illness and may find refuge and privacy within quiet green or blue spaces? E.g. people who are homeless, van dwellers, refugees and asylum seekers?
    - Have you set out tangible actions to address any identified gaps in the plans?

- **If not:**
    - Could you resource a DPO to review your plans to identify gaps?
    - Could you involve DPO representatives within an equalities partnership to embed such insights and EqIA processes into your long-term planning?

- **If you are introducing new green or blue spaces, or planning to improve existing spaces in an area (to enhance climate resilience or otherwise) have you:**
    - Worked with Disabled people to embed accessibility in these plans (reflecting on how people will get to/from these spaces safely and move within them freely i.e. considering the full access chain)?
    - Included mechanisms to prevent Disabled people (and other communities on low incomes) being displaced from their homes through processes of green/blue gentrification?

- **Have you established effective links with other relevant Council departments and agencies? e.g. to ensure there are safe, accessible and reliable transport links to green and blue spaces (see 'transport' resource); that Disabled people can access green jobs skills training pathways to shape green space design, management and maintenance decisions (see 'green jobs' resource); and to explore opportunities to 'green' public open spaces near key services (e.g. health and social care services, high streets, schools etc.) in an accessible way to make it easier for Disabled people to integrate nature experiences in their routines if they wish to.**



Areas to prioritise

- Green and blue spaces should be made more accessible.
- There should be an equality of experience for Disabled people in nature, with Disabled people involved in shaping these experiences.
- The needs of Disabled people should be considered when designing and maintaining nature spaces for heat and flood resilience. For example, the accessibility of journeys to parks and access to water fountains and shade.

Read the full list of actions to consider around nature in Bristol's community climate action plan by and for Disabled people.



Credit: ShamPhat photography

Case studies

- **The charity, Your Park Bristol and Bath**, has created a toolkit to support communities to co-design accessibility improvements in their local parks. The community-led access audits have paid local Disabled people to come together and discuss the access challenges they've experienced in the park and prioritise solutions. In partnership with other local groups, they completed the changes to the first park – Millenium Green in Hartcliffe Bristol – in early 2025. Changes included a wider entranceway, smooth resurfaced paths, sensory markers, raised planters, additional seating, a community noticeboard, a handrail, a large shelter and a sensory garden.

- **Sensing Nature guided walks**, Westonbirt Arboretum: From 2020 – 2022, Westonbirt Arboretum worked with the University of Exeter's Sensing Nature project to recruit, train and learn from visually impaired guides to co-create immersive and interactive sensory experiences across the Arboretum, enticing visitors off the main paths to explore the rich textures, sounds and sensations of the site. These walks have continued to develop since, highlighting the importance of working with Disabled people as knowledgeable curators of visitor experience. While Westonbirt is a challenging site to access without private transport, this work does demonstrate a creative approach to bringing people whose experiences are seldom heard to the heart of the interpretation process.

- **Collective Climate Repair**: Led by the Sensory Trust, and funded by the National Lottery Community Fund, this is a UK-wide project exploring how to put equity and collective action at the heart of climate repair. The project aims to create climate information in alternative primary languages (including British Sign Language, braille and symbol communication methods), and to work with people who are d/Deaf, neurodivergent and/or blind and partially sighted to demonstrate and implement practical interventions e.g. accessible rain gardens, wildflower planting, heat mapping school grounds etc.

Further resources

- Your Park's report, 'Not just a check box: Equitable access to parks for disabled people and unpaid carers': https://yourpark.org.uk/not-just-a-checkbox
- 'Sensing Nature' resources for supporting diverse nature experiences with and for people with sight impairment: https://sensing-nature.com/ [navigate to the 'Outcomes' tab]
- Re-Storying Landscapes for Social Inclusion guidance (drawing on the Westonbirt example): https://sensing-nature.com/news/restorying-landscapes-guidance
- Groundwork's report, 'Out of Bounds: Equity in access to urban nature': https://www.groundwork.org.uk/about-groundwork/reports/outofbounds/
- Sensory Trust's guidance, 'By All Reasonable Means: least restrictive access to the outdoors': https://www.sensorytrust.org.uk/resources/guidance/by-all-reasonable-means-least-restrictive-access-guidance
- Sensory Trust's 'Collective Climate Repair' project, demonstrating how working with plants and with neurodivergent and Disabled communities can create accessible opportunities to cool and calm the climate: https://www.sensorytrust.org.uk/projects/collective-climate-repair

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