

# Green & blue spaces

Exploring the benefits of green & blue spaces for wellbeing in mental health social work

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# Background to the study

Well established evidence base & accepted public discourse

Mechanisms include:  
 Physical activity levels ➡ improved cardiovascular health, bone & muscle strength, sleep & self-esteem

Social benefits ➡ opportunities to build social networks, increase social capital, improve neighbourhood cohesion & community engagement

Mental health benefits ➡ associations with physical health benefits & social contact but interaction with nature in itself provides interest & opportunities to escape from daily worries

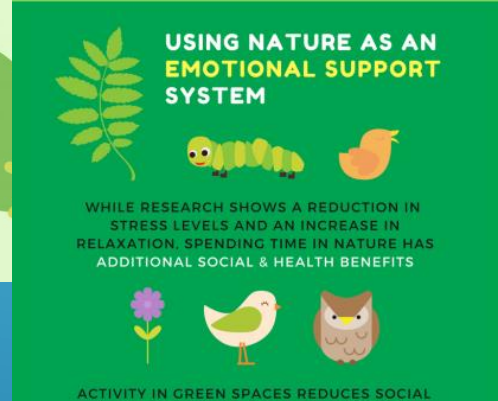
Economic benefits ➡ reduction in GP visits, prescriptions, inpatient care & social services (estimated £185m savings 2020)

Psychological benefits ➡ perceptions of health, improved life satisfaction, healthy lifestyle behaviours



Time in nature

Reduces	Increases
Depression	Meditative feelings
Stress	Good mood
Anxiety	Empathy
Rumination	Attention & focus



in the brain  
 empathy & love



# Research questions

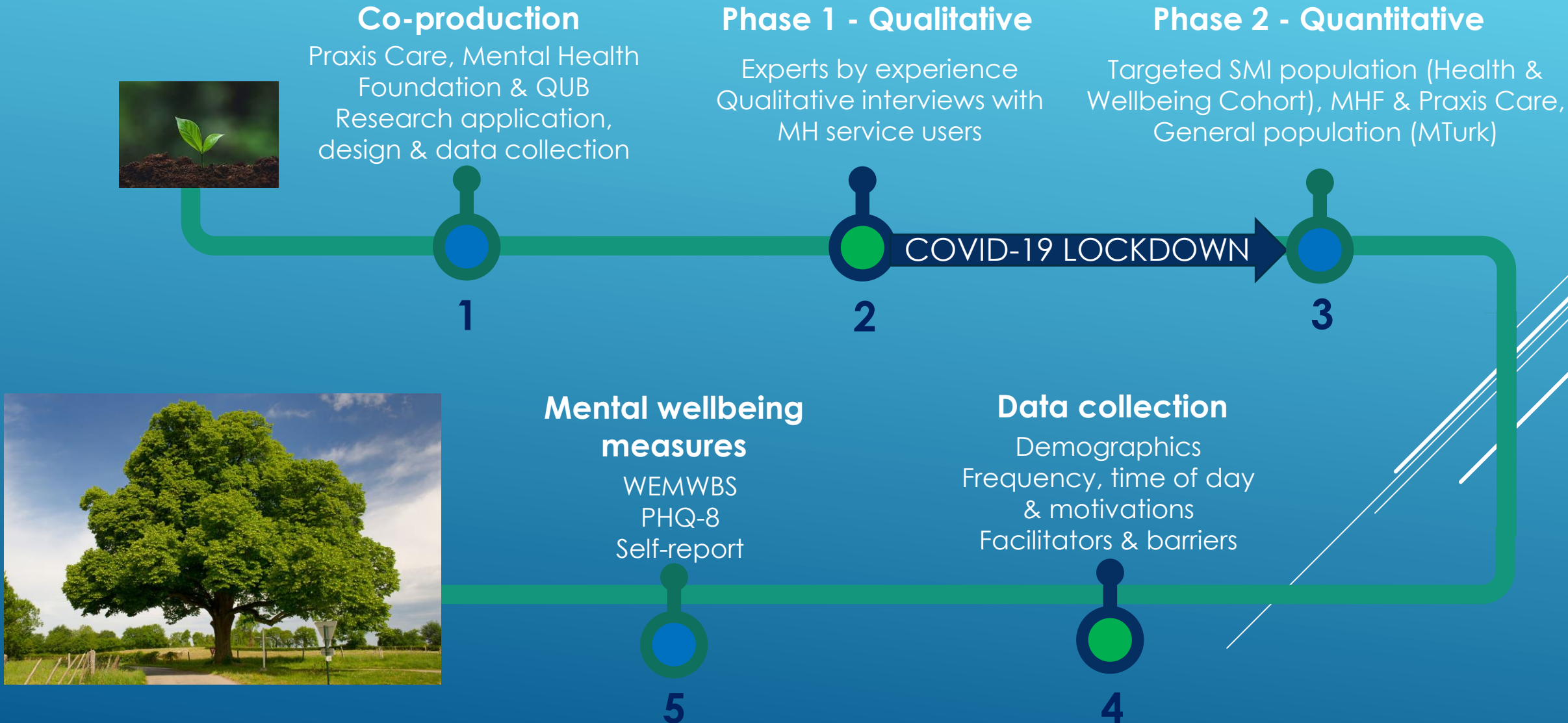
How do people experiencing mental health problems use & benefit from green & blue spaces?

Are there differences in the frequency and use of green and blue spaces between people with and without mental health problems?



Carrick-a-Rede Rope Bridge, Co Antrim, Northern Ireland

# Methods





# Qualitative findings





# Qualitative findings

## Participants (n = 11)

6 women, 5 men

Aged 34-84 years old, M = 53 (SD = 12.61)



## Mental health service users

Supported living, day services, befriending - non-specified diagnosis, ranging from mild-moderate to severe & enduring



## Frequency

Most had daily access to green & blue spaces (30-160 mins per day)  
2 participants went out rarely



## Motivations

Daily & necessary routine

Organised around tasks or errands that provided structure to the day

Understanding that being outdoors contributed to mental wellbeing



# Qualitative findings

## Restorative power of nature

Feeling uplifted  
Energy  
Soothing  
Reconnection  
Hope, inspiring  
Bidirectional process  
Cleansing, purifying

Keeps my mood lifted...

You can reconnect...you can go outside & get a good rest

I think you get out what you are holding & I think also you take in what they are giving off...

## Wildlife

Do you know what I like? The colours of birds, I like to hear the birds singing. It makes you feel relaxed...I feel connected with nature as I can hear the birds sing

## Care & protection

Has to be preserved  
...

## Physical activity & healthy habits

Exercise & mental health

If you sit in the house all day...you just sit eat a lot of rubbish

## Fear & safety

Practical safety issues – risk  
Social anxiety

I do like to get out but it's just that I get butterflies &...when you go for a walk, you panic a bit & then you want to go back to the house

## Social contact

Feeling part of a community  
Social isolation, particularly during Covid

Now we can't meet people. People are important to other people. They help each other.

# Qualitative findings

## Barriers

Physical health, feeling tired  
Mental health difficulties  
Social isolation  
Lack of transport



## Facilitators

Support from the service provider, providing encouragement  
Understanding the connection with mental wellbeing  
Undertaking functional tasks  
Seeking social contact





# Quantitative findings

## Online survey participants (n = 1791)

51.8% female, 80.7% White. Age M = 41.8 years (SD = 12.32). UK & US sample

## Mental health problems

Women, being gay or bisexual, or having a disability significantly increased the chance of reporting experience of mental health problems

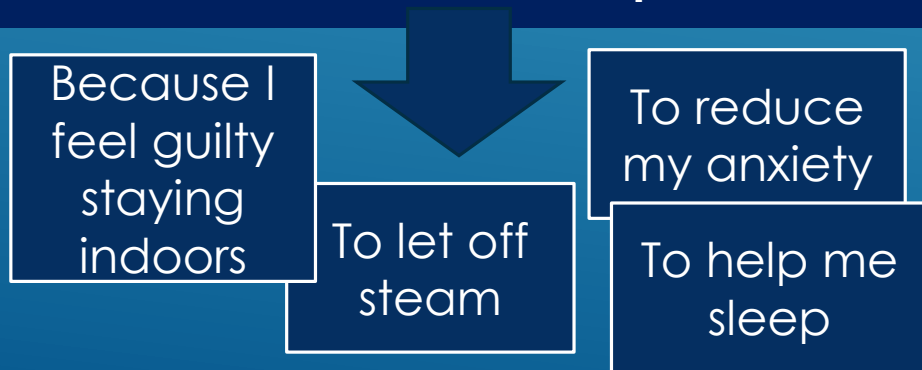
## Access to green & blue spaces

More frequent use of green & blue spaces was associated with no experience of mental health problems based on either self-report or scoring 10 or more on the PHQ-8

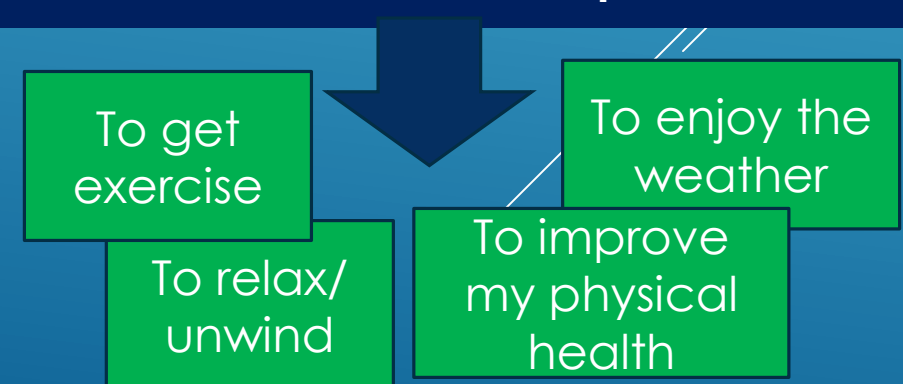
## Motivations

The differences between reasons for spending time outdoors were statistically significant for people

### With mental health problems



### Without mental health problems



# Quantitative findings

## Barriers

### With experience of mental health problems

Feeling unsafe  
How I look/feel about myself  
Makes me feel anxious

### Without mental health problems

No free time/other commitments  
The weather

## Facilitators

### With experience of mental health problems

My mood  
The right clothing/shoes  
To get a break from other people

### Without mental health problems

The weather  
To get a break from other people  
My pets  
Conservation/environmental reasons



# Conclusions & implications for MH SW

There are differences in how people engage with green & blue spaces. We need to get the messaging right.

Small measures can make a big difference. Access to pictures, views, indoor & outdoor landscaping & opportunities to connect with nature is restorative. SW can promote this in policy & practice.

Practical support can be enabling. Interventions involving buddy systems, social contact & tackling barriers around self image can help.

Change can't happen in isolation. Learning from urban & rural planning, architecture, public health, natural resource planning & transport can be shared.

