



Culture Nature England is a research and development partnership between Natural England and Libraries Connected. The programme has funded nature connection activities in diverse communities via the public library network.

Delivered as part of Natural England's **Protected Sites Strategy**, the Culture Nature England (CNE) programme explores ways to engage a wide range of people with nature - both for the benefit of people (through the wellbeing and health benefits of nature connection) and for nature (by increasing awareness and valuing of the natural world). The programme has been independently evaluated by the Countryside and Community Research Institute (CCRI) at the University of Gloucestershire, in collaboration with Expert Academic Partnerships (EAP).

The programme has been delivered at scale across England, with 25 library services each receiving up to £6,000 of funding, which they have used to deliver **hundreds of activities, reaching audiences in their thousands**. Activities have been strikingly varied, with a dual focus on getting people out into nature and bringing nature into libraries in inclusive and accessible ways - particularly, for audiences who face access barriers or may not have previously engaged with nature-focused initiatives.

From walks and sensory sessions, to nature-themed story-times, community gardening, arts and crafts and immersive digital experiences, the programme has engaged audiences and fostered library partnerships with conservation organisations, schools, mental health services, care homes, creatives and community groups. Library staffs' local knowledge has been central to shaping activities that are relevant and accessible:

"The programme's flexibility has allowed libraries to develop activities that are locally grounded, and meet audiences where they are on their nature connection journey."

Dr Demelza Jones, CCRI (Evaluation Team Lead)

Audience feedback shows **high levels of engagement and enjoyment of activities, increased sense of nature connection, and wellbeing benefits**. The programme's Nature Connection training offer has helped equip libraries to continue this work - deepening their awareness of the benefits that nature-focused activities can offer and the potential role of libraries in shaping and sharing these opportunities with communities.

The following showcases activity across seven case study library services visited by the evaluation team. They highlight the breadth of work delivered - in varied locations and library settings, and with a wide range of audiences.

i: Solihull Libraries – Hill of the Elms

Hobs Moat is a branch library within the Solihull Libraries network, located close to Birmingham airport at the Solihull Borough border. The library is in a busy residential area, near to several schools and the expansive green space of Elmdon Park (the focus of the library's Culture Nature project). The park includes a local nature reserve (managed by Warwickshire Wildlife Trust), as well as sports pitches, playground and a lake. Created a public park in 1944, the site was historically park and farm land for a now-vanished Georgian manor.



“Without the history, the park is just some grass and some trees, and how easy is it to build on some grass and some trees?” (Library staff interview)

The library was motivated to apply to CNE for ‘Hill of the Elms’ as an opportunity to capitalise on and strengthen library links between the Young Archaeologists Club (YAC), the Solihull Tree Wardens and local historians. The project also leveraged staff members’ existing skills and interests in archaeology and landscape documentation, with one team member also the council’s Archivist and always thinking about adding to the archives “*for the future*”.

In the context of high local development pressures, the project drew on these sets of relationships and skills to encourage exploration and documentation of the current park landscape. The project explored the impact of human interaction with this environment over centuries and community valuation of local green spaces and their history.

Audiences for the activity included young people aged 8-16 (YAC members) and local community members accessing project outputs. Activities included guided walks; young people learning non-invasive archaeological techniques including drone surveys, LiDAR, and resistivity methods and practicing these in Elmdon Park; a multi-platform



In Solihull, CNE has strengthened connections with partners, and a key legacy of the project is partners' enhanced understanding of library capabilities - supporting future collaboration.

Other outcomes include new resources for ongoing archival work, and staff development through raised understandings of nature connection possibilities and confidence in urban nature programming.

community exhibition held at the borough's central library; and a short film documenting the project. Staff saw the CNE programme as an opportunity to **test a new approach to nature programming in urban settings** through this innovative combination of natural environment discovery, local history, technical skills development, and community resource creation.

The activity attended by the evaluation team was a guided walk around Elmdon Park for the YAC, accompanied by local history experts and a tree warden. The facilitators skilfully combined insights into local heritage and social history with observations of the landscape and natural environment. This included discussing how to measure the age of a living tree via trunk circumference; observation of the recolonisation by nature of the manor's walled garden and labourers' cottage sites; and pointing out the enduring presence of the Sequoias (left) and Monkey Puzzle trees introduced as exotic specimens by the 18th century estate owners and spread via wildlife activity. There was also discussion of wider environmental issues such as the role of mature trees in managing impacts of climate crisis.

While the participating young people and their families seemed to be coming to the activity from a relatively high starting point of nature connection and awareness, they spoke to researchers about the positive influence of walking the familiar space of the park at a slower pace, guided by experts, and being encouraged to stop and notice things they might "*otherwise just walk past*".

The library has already developed learning and solutions concerning some of the challenges faced, including flexible scheduling and contingency planning in relation to poor weather, which impacted project delivery. They also struggled to find a nature connection trainer but encouraged and paid a local organisation to deliver it, which has now developed into an ongoing local training offer.

ii: Inspire: Culture, Learning & Libraries (Nottinghamshire) - Places to Connect

Kirkby-in-Ashfield Library is located within a town centre precinct, and serves a community marked by significant social and economic disadvantage. Library staff identified high levels of mental ill-health, social isolation, and low confidence among residents as significant barriers to participation in both cultural and environmental activity. The library team saw the Culture Nature programme as an opportunity to reactivate a disused library courtyard - offering a calm, nature-inspired space that felt safe, welcoming, and easily accessible.



Staff observed participants lingering in the space after the structured elements had ended, using the seating and planting informally and returning across multiple sessions.

The project helped normalise the idea of public nature space as something familiar and usable, not remote or exclusive.

The project focused on transforming the library's courtyard into a creative, sensory-rich space through a series of informal, drop-in activities. These included planter-building, bug hotel construction and seating installation, alongside other nature-themed craft and wellbeing-focused activities. Local artists and volunteers collaborated with staff in shaping the sessions, while Inspire's internal cultural programming team supported delivery and design. While there was no formal environmental partner, staff embedded nature connection through craft, planting, and gentle ecological themes, creating a blend of creativity and nature that suited the library setting.

The activities engaged a broad cross-section of the community, with particular success in reaching families and individuals with lower social confidence. The drop-in format allowed people to participate independently, without pressure or commitment. Parents appreciated the availability of free, creative activities, and children responded well to the hands-on, sensory nature of the sessions as well as opportunities for less structured exploration of the new space.

For the library staff team, the project was energising and affirming. It demonstrated that library staffs' existing facilitation, communication and informal engagement skills could be readily applied to nature-based activities and build on their existing commitments to enhancing community wellbeing. The experience also strengthened collaboration across roles and encouraged staff to experiment more confidently with creative health concepts. The work helped position the library more clearly as a space that supports wellbeing and social connection, as well as its more traditionally understood role in literacy and digital access.

The scale and layout of the courtyard made it ideal for relaxed, manageable delivery. Its visibility from inside the library created a natural flow, and the enclosed setting reassured participants who might have found a more exposed space overwhelming. The informal approach to delivery, focused more on hosting than instructing, was a key factor in the project's success. Challenges included staff capacity, as delivery relied on a small team fitting the work around their usual duties. There are also questions about how to maintain the space long-term, and discussions around balancing open social use of the courtyard with curated activity.



The courtyard remains in use and is now regarded as a key aspect of the library's offer. Staff expressed a clear intention to continue using the space informally and to include it in future bids and partnership work. Elements of the approach have already influenced programming elsewhere in the Inspire network, and the project has helped make the case for more creative and wellbeing-focused library activity.

The Kirkby-in-Ashfield experience shows that nature connection does not require wild landscapes or ecological expert-led programming. With creative delivery and a focus on inclusion, libraries can generate powerful local outcomes. Supporting staff to work relationally and flexibly, and permitting them to try new things, proved as crucial as any specific content or design.

iii: Somerset Libraries – Celebrating Somerset

Somerset's network of libraries serves a diverse community, incorporating hub towns with large rural hinterlands, areas of high socio-economic inequality, and ageing populations. While Somerset is a nature-rich county, the Culture Nature project aimed to address barriers to engaging with nature locally. This included limited knowledge of where to access green spaces and protected sites and how to visit and enjoy these places, as well as accessibility challenges for people with restricted mobility and/or low incomes.



Somerset Libraries were motivated to apply to the Culture Nature programme to strengthen informal connections and ad hoc collaborations with nature partners - including Somerset Wildlife Trust and Exmoor National Park - through more structured partnership working. Another factor was the presence of staff members and volunteers with relevant skills and interests, providing both capability and capacity that could be deepened through the project, and work to the longer-term benefit of libraries' local communities.

The programme included nature-focused events within libraries where audiences were invited to move through varied activity stations. These included hands-on creative activities such as nature journaling, storytelling and crafts, alongside specially created digital and audio content. Audiences listened to natural environment soundscapes, took part in immersive experiences via Virtual Reality headsets (left) and watched filmed visits to local protected sites, guided by experts from partner nature organisations. The films aimed to 'demystify' these spaces and encourage audiences' future engagement.

The library service aspired to run inclusive and free activities that would engage a range of audiences - spanning children and families (including via targeted work with local schools), young adults, older adults, carers, disadvantaged people in high Index of Multiple Deprivation areas, and people with restricted mobility. The programme of activity **engaged with around 300 people across five events** with resultant upticks in library membership.

Challenges included high ambitions but limited staffing capacity, gathering evaluation feedback within a 'drop-in' format, delivering in the winter when engagement and enthusiasm for outdoor nature activities may have been limited, and awareness barriers whereby perhaps adults still don't connect libraries with "fun stuff" or nature learning, suggesting ongoing need for perception change.

Somerset Libraries report a range of important outcomes of the project, alongside those of addressing participants' needs. These include **network strengthening through cross-sector working with diverse partners to deliver specialised programming**. Local schools, for example, increasingly recognise that Somerset libraries can deliver high-quality educational experiences, creating a foundation for future collaboration and visits. Work with environmental partners is also continuing - for example, through delivery of nature-themed activity as part of the Summer Reading Challenge.

There is also an equipment and content legacy. The VR content loaded on library devices can enable future similar events, as well as the ten short films presented by nature partners and providing an accessible introduction to Somerset's many natural spaces.

Short films showcasing Somerset's wild spaces, produced in partnership with nature organisations



iv: Bolton Libraries - Culture Nature Farnworth

Farnworth is a branch library serving a community in south east Bolton, bordering Salford. Located near a shopping precinct and opposite a park, it has an annual footfall of around 37,000. The surrounding area is ethnically diverse and includes pockets of social and economic deprivation, and some residential areas are densely packed with limited green space. Library staff highlighted that some local residents, particularly ESOL communities and lower income families, face barriers to accessing nature and inclusive opportunities for outdoor engagement.



Participants have included ESOL learners, older residents, parents and children, and individuals with additional needs.

Many had not previously engaged with library activities, while others joined spontaneously after visiting the library for other reasons.

The Culture Nature programme was seen as a chance to address some of these community needs while contributing to the library's broader ambition to become a hub for environmental awareness and wellbeing. As part of the national Green Libraries initiative, Farnworth Library has aimed to use the programme as a stepping stone for embedding nature-connectedness into their offer for local residents.

The programme has consisted of a three-phase series of creative and sensory outdoor and indoor activities, tailored to ESOL groups, the general public, and families. Activities have included nature walks, mindful sensory grounding exercises, mono-printing using natural forms, crafts and making, and edible planting. Visual displays (left) and nature-themed book collections have also been used to raise awareness and curiosity of local green spaces and protected sites, and broader nature themes.

Partners have included a Church-based community hub working with ESOL groups, the TCV (The Conservation Volunteers) who delivered training, and Groundwork, who supported one of the nature-based sessions.



Familiar faces returned for multiple sessions, helping to build a feeling of community and connection, and participants described increased appreciation for local green spaces and heightened awareness of nature in their daily lives. Some spoke of taking more notice of their environment and valuing the opportunity to engage in tactile, creative practices. Facilitators noted improved confidence among participants and a willingness to try new things, with some proud to share or take home the work they created in the programme's making-based sessions (left).

The programme has strengthened Farnworth Library's capacity to deliver nature-connected activities and helped integrate environmental themes across its service offer via strengthened connections with environmental organisations. It has reinforced the site's contribution to the Green Libraries agenda and equipped staff and volunteers with new skills and confidence. Staff felt increasingly capable of embedding nature into programming in meaningful ways.

Challenges have included the unpredictable nature of drop-in attendance which could make planning and resourcing difficult, difficulties in sustaining engagement due to external organisational challenges, and the winter weather limiting some outdoor elements.

The programme has reinforced Farnworth Library's continued commitment to nature-connectedness and community wellbeing. The library has acquired permanent resources that will continue to be used beyond the programme, and staff are planning to expand environmental programming through partnerships and wider borough-wide library initiatives.

The work is contributing directly to Bolton's emerging Green Libraries Manifesto, and illustrates how activity emphasising sensory, creative, and mindful interactions with nature — rather than technical or knowledge-based approaches — are accessible to a wide range of participants, including under-served audiences. Flexibility in delivery, supported by motivated staff, volunteers and partners, can open up powerful experiences that deepen people's connection to their environment and to one another.

v: Suffolk Libraries - Nature Nurture

Lowestoft Library, situated in one of the UK's most economically deprived coastal towns, has used the CNE programme to respond to intersecting local needs of poor health outcomes, economic hardship, and limited access to green space. The team wanted to create an outdoor library space that supported community wellbeing while strengthening their growing work around environmental engagement and creative health.



Activities were deliberately designed to be low-pressure and drop-in, combining outdoor work to develop the garden space with indoor creative activity. This made the project accessible to many participants, including families who had not previously used the library.

As a National Portfolio Organisation and signatory to the Greener Libraries Manifesto, the library had already begun thinking more seriously about its ecological role. CNE provided the platform to make that ambition visible and tangible.

The project transformed a previously underused area at the front of the library into a small garden space designed to be both functional and symbolic, and co-created with the local community. Working with Suffolk Wildlife Trust (SWT), the library team have delivered bug hotel workshops, sapling planting, gabion seating construction, and hand-painted signage. SWT also provided staff training at nearby Carlton Marshes, which shaped the design and tone of the activities. A local ecologist offered informal support during delivery, advising participants and promoting awareness of the nearby protected landscape.

The site's highly visibility at the front of the library has been an important asset, drawing in passers-by and encouraging spontaneous participation. The blended indoor-outdoor format supported intergenerational activity, and the creative

elements have invited a sense of ownership. Audience feedback suggests that the open format, visible location, and relaxed atmosphere have helped participants feel comfortable engaging. Families described the opportunity to work on the garden as a welcome alternative to screen-based leisure.

For library staff, the project has proved personally and professionally rewarding. **It has boosted staff confidence around outdoor delivery and confirmed that existing skills - in facilitation, creativity, and community engagement - translate well to informal, environmental activity.** The work has also strengthened internal collaboration, with different teams coordinating across programming, logistics, and engagement. The partnership with SWT will likely continue, and the garden is now considered part of the library's core identity. Staff also noted therapeutic benefits for themselves and spoke positively about the emotional impact of co-creating the space with the community. Challenges have included concerns about antisocial behaviour and questions about long-term upkeep. While the garden was praised for its accessibility and welcoming feel, some staff reflected that future iterations might benefit from a more ecologically wild or experimental aesthetic.

The work has left a clear legacy. The garden is now used regularly and has influenced the design of future programming. Staff are exploring new ways of linking the space to creative health pathways, and green social prescribing offers. There is also interest in creating light-touch peer groups for libraries undertaking similar projects for sharing best practice.

Key learning from Lowestoft is that visible nature embedded within a civic space can reshape how people engage with the environment and the institution every day.

Even with modest resources, libraries can create powerful spaces for well-being, social connection, and low-barrier environmental participation.

Ensuring library staff have time to reflect and share this work across sites could strengthen its impact across the wider sector.



vi: Gateshead Libraries – Welcoming Nature

Welcoming Nature has partnered with a church charity and an artist to work with people seeking asylum who are temporarily accommodated in Gateshead hotels. Participants have taken part in guided walks, nature-inspired art workshops and shared meals – providing opportunities for these new Gateshead residents to gain familiarity with local green spaces and foster social connections.



A key wellbeing benefit has been giving individuals and families a break from the environment of the hotel, where they spend a lot of time in their rooms, are socially isolated from the wider community, and where children have little opportunity for movement and play.

The project has been delivered by Gateshead Central Library. Unusually for a main library, this is not situated in the town centre but in a residential neighbourhood where 37% of catchment residents live in areas within the top fifth of deprivation nationally. The library has a track record of enhancing community access to the outdoors; in 2010 establishing a library garden for use by the local community.

A central aspect of the library's Culture Nature programme has been boosting participants' familiarity with local green spaces as they settle into the area. Walks have included local spaces such as Saltwell Park (left) – which is a 10-minute walk from the library. Alongside this, participants have travelled further afield to sites such as Chopwell Woods – a Forestry England-managed woodland spanning almost 900 acres on the fringes of the borough. These types of visits served different purposes. While it was important that participants were taken to very local spaces that they could visit independently in their day to day lives, the organiser also wanted to offer opportunities to experience the “wow factor” of nature in wilder, less accessible places.

Fostering social connections has been an important outcome of the project as people seeking asylum are often very isolated, and *“nature has been a great tool for people to connect”* (Library staff interview). Examples included participants teaching each other the names of plants and animals in their own languages, comparing landscapes and wildlife to that in their places of origin, and children playing together outside:

“Walking together was brilliant, the young people ran around and played whilst the adults were commenting on nature and shared laughter and stories in spite of there being no common language”.

Participants had also particularly enjoyed tactile nature-themes craft activities such as clay (below): *“it’s taking the pressure off a conversation happening and letting people interact in other ways”* (Artist interview)

Project funds had supported the provision of hot food from a local caterer. Sharing a meal with others and *“having a nice day out”* with people who were kind and welcoming towards them was powerful in supporting the wellbeing of people whose everyday lives can be difficult, monotonous and uncertain, and in a wider social context where people seeking asylum may be on the receiving end of hostility and an overwhelmingly negative media and political narrative.

“[the sessions] have made a significant difference in the mental health and wellbeing of the hotel residents. Many of them have shared how much [the facilitators’] kindness has meant to them”
(Church charity support worker)



The same core group had engaged with most of the activity sessions with a low drop-out rate. Facilitators noted that people who attended multiple sessions had grown in confidence, and that participants were visiting the library independently to engage with other library services. The programme has also allowed signposting to other activities in the local area – for example, the language café at the Baltic arts centre, and Beaver Scouts for a family whose child was particularly interested in outdoor adventures.

Some key challenges included walking in inclement winter weather, which could be a particular problem when participants lacked warm, waterproof coats or sturdy shoes, and the need to adapt flexibly to the unpredictable circumstances of the hotel residents, who could be moved out of the accommodation without much notice and whose lives often felt outside of their own control. While the library staff running the project felt very comfortable with the ‘people connection’ aspect of activities, they were less confident with nature connection. Nature connection training had helped with this, and they had thought carefully about ways to more directly incorporate nature connection in ways that felt comfortable:

“With the nature stuff, I love it, but I don’t have the knowledge. I can’t point at a tree and say what tree it is.” (Library staff interview)

Working with the right partners has therefore been crucial. Partnering with an artist whose practice is based in nature and who has extensive knowledge of the natural world but is *“brilliant at the people thing as well”* (Library staff interview), has been central to the project’s success and to bolstering library staffs’ confidence in delivery, while the partnership with the church charity has enabled a relationship of trust with a vulnerable and socially isolated population who face significant barriers to nature access and participation.

The project has built on the library’s existing work supporting local asylum-seeking families through an ESOL homework club for teenagers. Strengthening the relationship with Alive Church and their work supporting hotel-based asylum seekers has been an important outcome of the project. **Library staff feel increasingly networked into and trusted by the wider community of organisations supporting asylum seekers across Gateshead, leaving the library service well-placed to welcome and enhance the wellbeing of this vulnerable population.**

Nature-inspired ceramics produced during sessions



vii: Camden Libraries and Camley Street Natural Park

Adjacent to Kings Cross Station, the concrete and glass surroundings of Pancras Square Library (Camden) appear a nature-depleted environment. But the nearby Camley Street Natural Park, a designated local nature reserve, is a green oasis. A former coal drop between the railway and the Regent's Canal, the two-acre site has been recolonised by nature, and includes woodland, grassland, and wetland habitats supporting birds, butterflies, amphibians and plant species. Managed by the London Wildlife Trust and including a Visitor and Learning Centre, the site attracts thousands of visitors per year.



The funding has facilitated a new partnership between the library and the LWT Camley Street team. For LWT, the project offered a chance to explore working with a public library and to work with schools in a different way – with literacy as the starting point rather than science.

Pancras Square Library has used the Culture Nature funding to deliver a nature connection initiative in partnership with the London Wildlife Trust (LWT) and local primary schools.

The library serves a resident community with high levels of socio-economic disadvantage - 1 in 3 children in Camden Borough grow up in poverty. The library service has been working with the Reading Agency and local schools on initiatives to improve childhood literacy and viewed the CNE funding as an opportunity to develop this work with schools through a new activity offer.

Classes from two primary schools in the Somers Town area of the borough have visited the library to take part in a specially curated story-time, to spark curiosity and introduce key themes relating to the natural world – including the importance of protecting nature. These visits also include sharing information with the children about the library service, and how they and their families can join the library, borrow books and get involved in other library activities. Children have then walked the short distance to Camley Street Natural Park, where, guided by LWT outreach



staff, they have explored and collected materials to inspire nature-themed creative writing (left). These activities were highly sensory, with the children discussing objects' colours, scents and textures, as well as describing the bird, plant and insect species they had spotted.

Both the library staff and the LWT team talked about their perception that many Londoners “don’t feel like they belong in nature”, and the barriers that local children face in accessing nature. A teacher explained that most of the pupils live in flats, and children’s local green spaces tend to be highly managed (i.e. football pitches). Some families’ circumstances mean they don’t often travel to natural spaces for leisure (over 70% of the school’s pupils qualify for Pupil Premium), so activities arranged via school were often a unique opportunity that children wouldn’t otherwise experience.

Through the visit, the children gained awareness of the Camley Street site, and for the LWT, a key outcome was for the children to have a positive experience and to go away feeling **this was a local place where they were welcome and that they could visit again with their families.**

The LWT team talked about how they used discussions of pressures on this small local site as **representative of pressures facing nature globally** – for example, by encouraging the children to think about how almost all the city around them is designed for humans, and the value of spaces which meet the needs of other creatures. During their guided walk, the children were encouraged to stop, be still and quiet, and notice what was around them, and to closely examine the texture and smells of the natural objects they collected. This sensory engagement was reflected in children’s comments to the researchers during and after the activity (left).

*“it made me feel very calmed,
because there’s not that much noise”*

*“Did you see those birds? They were
flying over the water, like [making
swooping gesture] whooooosh!”*

*“I like to see all these trees, all close
together. I haven’t seen this many
trees ever, in my whole entire life”*

For the LWT team, working with the library had been a really positive experience and was a natural fit given their aligned inclusion and participation missions and the proximity of the respective sites. Engagement with **the Culture Nature project has encouraged the LWT to explore developing relationships with other London library services** because of the opportunities to connect with a wider range of schools and local communities that this could offer. Library staff and the LWT were actively planning project legacies, including an after school 'bug rangers' club which would involve visits to Camley Street and further engagement with the LWT team.



Pancras Square Library is an interesting case within the CNE cohort, as the library's architecture (located within an office block-style building), co-location with other council services, and wider corporate setting mean that some CNE activities that may have been the most straightforward for other libraries to deliver (for example, nature-themed displays) were challenging here – the library has very limited scope for display stands and staff are prohibited from sticking materials to the windows or walls.

But this collaborative initiative exemplifies how **cultural and environmental organisations can work together to enhance children's connection to nature through storytelling, sensory exploration, and creative expression, and how nature-based activity can support other important outcomes around increased engagement with library services and childhood literacy.**