

EU Consultation: Improving the mental health of the population: Towards a strategy on mental health for the European Union.

Consultation response from Natural England May 2006

Response number - 06/07- 014

Executive Summary

1. We recommend that an EU strategy specifically identifies ‘low key’ mental ill health issues as a priority area to be addressed by member states, and considers positive determination of chronic community mental health through establishing environmental quality objectives.
2. We strongly recommend that the framework of the strategy highlights the under-pinning determinants of mental health issues, in particular environmental inequity and access to quality environments. We also recommend that the strategy embraces a cross-cutting analysis of EU policy areas and instruments that have the potential to contribute to positive determination.
3. Natural England recommends adoption of initiatives to address the chronic environmental drivers of poor mental health, through targeted cross-sectoral intervention.

Introduction

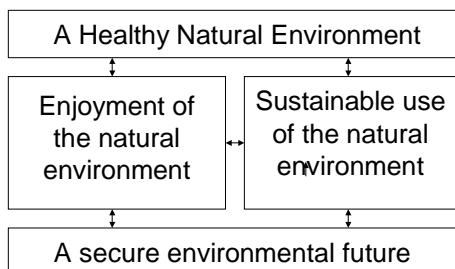
4. This consultation response has been produced by English Nature. English Nature is working with the Rural Development Service and the Countryside Agency’s Landscape, Access and Recreation division to create *Natural England*, a new agency for people, places and nature.
5. Natural England is a new organisation which is currently being established under the *Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006*. *Natural England* is being formed by bringing together English Nature and parts of the Rural Development Service and the Countryside Agency.
6. *Natural England* has been charged with the responsibility to ensure that England’s unique natural environment including its flora and fauna, land and seascapes, geology and soils are protected and improved.

Natural England’s purpose as outlined in the Act is:

‘to ensure that the natural environment is conserved, enhanced, and managed for the benefit of present and future generations, thereby contributing to sustainable development’.

Strategic outcomes for Natural England

7. To achieve our purpose, *Natural England* has defined four strategic outcomes which will provide the focus for our activities and resources. The way in which these outcomes link together to conserve and enhance the natural environment is illustrated below.



8. To achieve these outcomes *Natural England* will:

- support individuals, organisations, land managers and business to take action to conserve and enhance the natural environment.
- increase the opportunities available for people to make the natural environment an enriching part of their every day lives.
- develop and promote sustainable solutions to environmental problems at a national, regional and local level and as a result increase the social and economic value provided by the natural environment.
- bring together organisations and individuals that influence and shape our environmental future, to achieve long term conservation and enhancement of the natural environment.
- play a role in international efforts to protect and enhance the natural environment through sharing our expertise, advice and advocacy.

Natural England will do this by applying an appropriate mix of advice, advocacy, incentives, regulation and practical action according to the international, national, regional and local challenges that the environment faces.

Comments on the Green Paper

9. Natural England welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation, which could develop and promote sustainable environmental solutions for the determination of mental health for which we have a duty.
10. ‘Q1: *how relevant is the mental health of the population.....?*’

The mental health of the EU population does place a burden on the social and economic systems of member states and as such presents a real challenge to societal, economic, and environmental sustainable development. We feel that the strategic consideration of mental health is relevant to broader EU strategic policy objectives. However, the consultation paper tends to focus on the extremes of mental ill health such as schizophrenia, but you also state that approximately 27% of the adult population experiences ‘low key’ mental ill health such as depression and stress related disorders.

In the UK alone, it is estimated that addressing these common place mental health problems could save £3.1 billion across government¹. A wide range of studies that the quality of environment has a significant bearing on ‘low key’ mental health issues, specifically accessibility of biodiverse green spaces in the built environment has been identified as a significant determinant^{2 3}

11. Natural England believe that mental health is relevant to EU strategic policy objectives. **We recommend that an EU strategy specifically identifies ‘low key’ mental ill issues as a priority area to be addressed by member states, and considers positive determination of chronic community mental health through establishing environmental quality objectives.**

12. ‘Q2: *Would the development of a comprehensive EU-strategy.....?*’

Natural England supports the proposed development of an EU Mental Health Strategy, that embraces the principles of Member State exchange and cooperation, policy coherence and stakeholder engagement extending the principles of the Aarhus Convention. **We strongly recommend that the framework of the strategy highlights the under-pinning determinants of mental health issues, in particular environmental inequity and access to quality environments. We also recommend that the strategy embraces a cross-cutting analysis of EU policy areas and instruments that have the potential to contribute to positive determination.** For example, the water framework directive, urban thematic strategy, 7th framework programme, CAFÉ, and sustainable development.

13. ‘Q3: *Are the initiatives proposed in sections 6 and 7 appropriate to support...?*’

The range of initiatives proposed addresses the major demographic groups with pronounced acute mental health issues, and in that respect represents positive step, as do the proposals to engage a wide range stakeholders, non-health policies, and interdisciplinary research. However, having identified the issue of low key mental conditions within the paper the proposed initiatives do not seem to respond to that identified need. **Natural England recommends adoption of initiatives to address the chronic environmental drivers of poor mental health, through targeted cross-sectoral intervention.** Such an approach should be piloted through member states. The EU should take a key in role in the evaluation of mental health benefits from such interventions, and the identification and evaluation of wider sustainable social, economic and environmental benefits that arise.

Dr Andy Clements
Executive Director Science, Evidence & Policy
Natural England

May 2006

¹ Wanless, D. (2004) Securing Good Health for the whole population: Final Report. London HM Treasury www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/wanless

² Galea.S, Ahem.J, Rudenstine S, Wallace Z, & Viahov D. (2005) Urban built environment and depression: a multilevel analysis. *J Epidemiological Community Health* 59(10) 882-7.

³ De Vries.S., Verheij, R.A., Groenewegen, P., and Spreeuwenberg, P. (2003) Natural environments – healthy environments? An exploratory analysis of the relationship between greenspace and health. *Environment and Planning* 35 p1717 – 1731

This paper represents the views of its author on the subject. These views have not been adopted or in any way approved by the Commission and should not be relied upon as a statement of the Commission's or Health & Consumer Protection DG's views. The European Commission does not guarantee the accuracy of the data included in this paper, nor does it accept responsibility for any use made thereof.