

Gardens & Wellbeing During the First UK Covid-19 Lockdown



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Summary

Research shows that gardens are important for wellbeing. To examine garden use and wellbeing during the first Covid-19 lockdown, a sample of 850 UK respondents were asked to recall their experiences and use of their home gardens between March and May 2020.

Key findings include:

- Gardens were used frequently during the lockdown, with around 60% visiting their garden at least once a day.
- Gardens were used more frequently than other natural environments during lockdown.
- More frequent garden visits were associated with better wellbeing.
- But more than 1 in 10 either had no access to a garden, or found it difficult to access one.
- Ethnic minorities and those with a low household income were more likely to have no garden access or find access difficult.
- Younger respondents were more likely to have difficult or no garden access than older respondents, with those under 47 years of age reporting the greatest difficulties.
- The more nature in the garden, the greater the wellbeing of respondents.
- Certain aspects of nature were particularly associated with improved wellbeing: natural sounds and smells, and animals, birds and insects.
- Respondents did multiple activities in their gardens, with 43% gardening, 27% spending time resting, sitting and lying down, 21% reading, 14% watching and feeding nature, 13% listening to music, radio and podcasts, and 11% enjoying the weather.



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Background

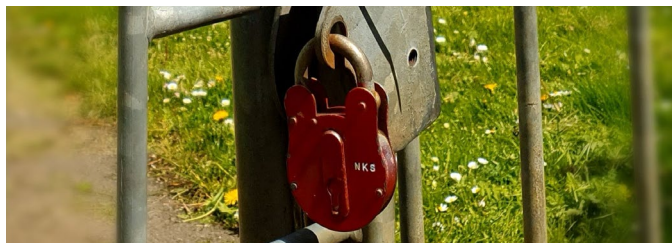
This report presents findings from a survey conducted in October 2020, looking back at how people engaged with nature in the UK during the first Covid-19 lockdown in March to May 2020. The survey was carried out as part of a UKRI-funded project by the University of Surrey and Natural England.

The Covid-19 Pandemic

On 11th March 2020, the World Health Organization declared the Covid-19 viral outbreak to be a pandemic.¹ The pandemic triggered several lockdowns across the UK nations during 2020 and 2021, in which the movements of people in the UK were severely restricted to reduce the spread of the virus². The first UK-wide lockdown began in March and was lifted in May 2020.

Wellbeing & Mental Health

The combined effects of fear of the virus and restrictions to movement had a serious impact on the mental health of those living in the UK during the first lockdown. Researchers found that depression, stress and anxiety were all higher during this period compared with usual population levels³. In April, one month in to the lockdown, psychological distress had significantly increased compared with pre-pandemic levels⁴, and there was an increase in suicidal ideation from March to May 2020⁵. In June 2020, researchers called for more research on ways to mitigate the mental health consequences of the pandemic⁶.



The Benefits of Gardens

Research conducted pre-pandemic clearly demonstrated the ability of gardens to improve wellbeing and mental health. A meta-analysis of 22 case studies published between 2002 and 2016 showed that gardening was associated with reduced depression and anxiety, and increases in life satisfaction and quality of life⁷. As well as gardening, spending time relaxing in a private garden was linked with greater wellbeing⁸.

Garden Use During the Pandemic

Given the potential benefits of spending time in gardens, researchers have been looking at the associations between wellbeing and garden use during the pandemic. Access to a private garden during the first lockdown was shown to be associated with higher levels of subjective wellbeing and it helped compensate for the perceived difficulty in accessing other greenspace⁹. Depression and anxiety were reduced for those who gardened during lockdown, with the greatest improvements for those who spent more than 30 minutes per day gardening¹⁰. And a study of older adults in Scotland just after the easing of the first lockdown found that greater home garden use was associated with improved emotional and mental health, and better sleep quality¹¹. Data from Natural England's People and Nature Survey (April-June 2020) showed that 88% of respondents with gardens felt those gardens were important to them¹², yet analysis by the Office for National Statistics highlighted the inequalities in garden access, with Black people "nearly four times as likely as White people to have no access to outdoor space at home"¹³.



The Survey

Background to the Survey

An online survey was conducted, forming an in-depth examination of how people engaged with nature during the first lockdown, and whether this was related to wellbeing. An important focus of this survey was on people's use of gardens, and this forms the subject of the present report.

Aims of the Survey

The research team aimed to add to the emerging body of research looking at the association between gardens and wellbeing during the pandemic by addressing the following questions:

- How often did people use their gardens during the first lockdown?
- Did some find it more difficult to access a garden than others?
- Was garden use associated with wellbeing improvements?
- Was nature in the garden associated with wellbeing?
- What did people do in their gardens?

Methods

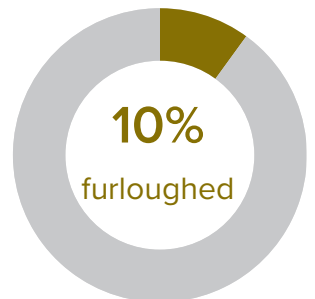
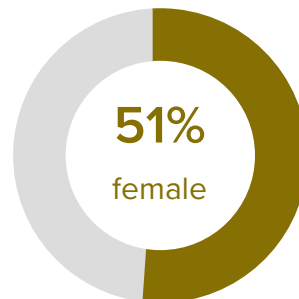
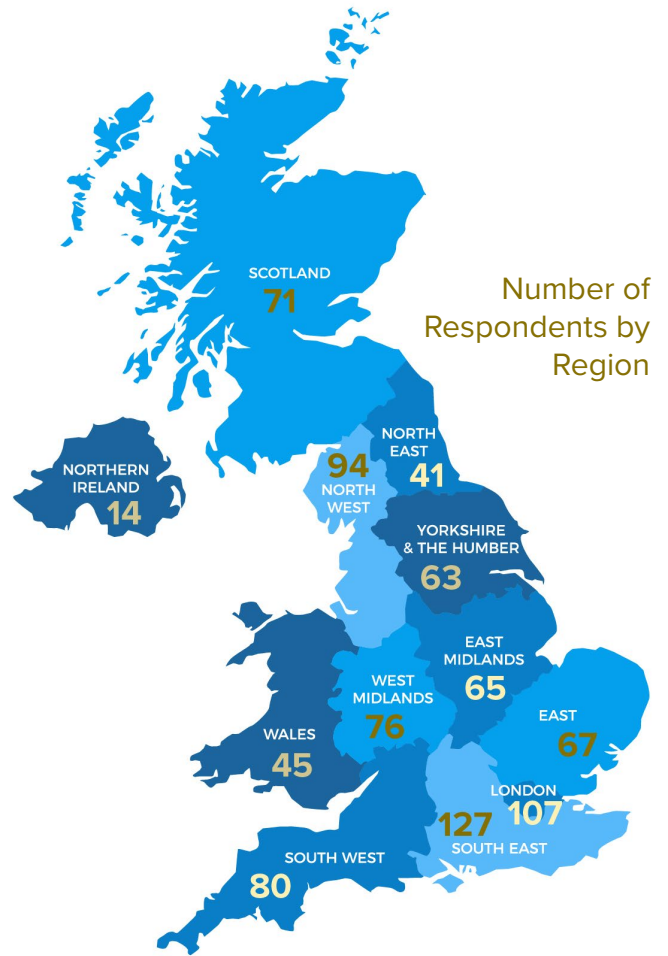
The online survey used a mixture of closed and open ended questions, to elicit quantitative and qualitative data, such as the frequency of garden visits and written descriptions of what people did in their gardens.

Period of Data Collection

The survey was completed in October 2020. Respondents were asked to think back to their garden use during the first lockdown, between 26th March to 13th May 2020, when UK-wide restrictions were enforced.

Respondents

A sample of 850 respondents representative of the UK population completed the survey. The charts on the right present key demographic characteristics of the respondents. These show that respondents were selected from across the UK, and that there was a relatively even split between male and females, and low and high income groups. The majority had access to a garden, either private or shared.



Average age = 46 years



90% Had a garden



10% Had no garden



Pre-tax annual household income
54% £30,000 or more



46% £29,999 or less

Garden Use

How often did people use their gardens during the first lockdown?

Garden Use

Most respondents reported visiting their garden on a regular basis during the first UK lockdown. More than half visited their garden at least once a day and 23% visited once or more a week; meaning that altogether, 82% visited at least weekly. 3% visited once a month or more and 15% almost never visited a garden.

Visited their garden once a day or more

59%

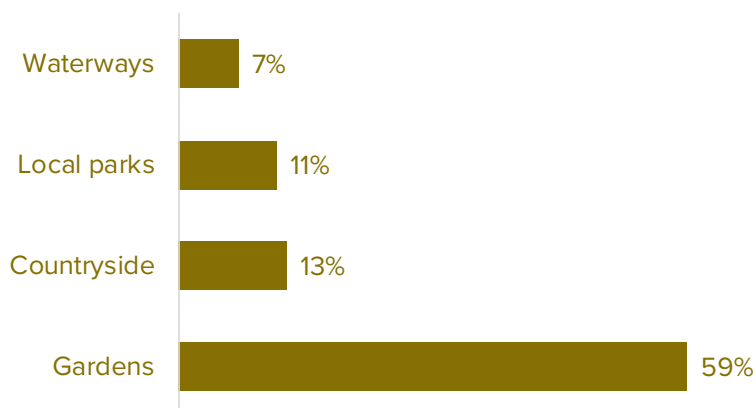
“ *Working from home more and not rushing into work daily meant that I had more time to do things like sit in the garden* ”

Garden Use Compared with Other Environments

The survey also looked at the use of other natural environments during lockdown, including waterways (such as the seaside & rivers), local parks (including playing fields & playgrounds), and the countryside (such as woodland, farmland & commons). The chart below shows the percentage of respondents who reported using these different environments at least once a day. It shows that gardens were used much more frequently during lockdown than these other types of natural environment.



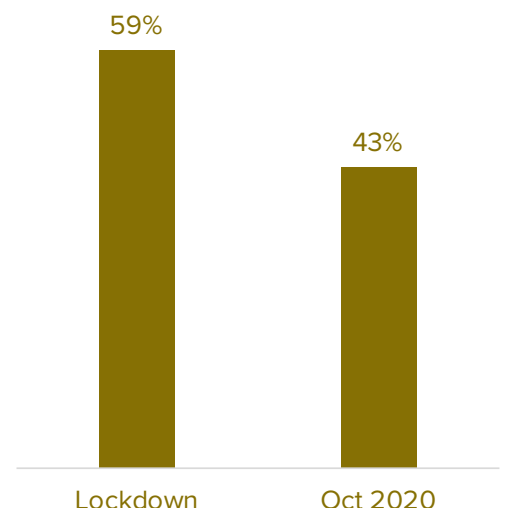
% Visiting at Least Once a Day



Garden Use Over Time

Respondents were also asked about their garden use in October 2020, after the first lockdown had ended (although some restrictions were in place in October). Garden use dropped between March-May and October, but almost half were still visiting daily into the autumn, despite the cooling weather.

% Visiting at Least Once a Day

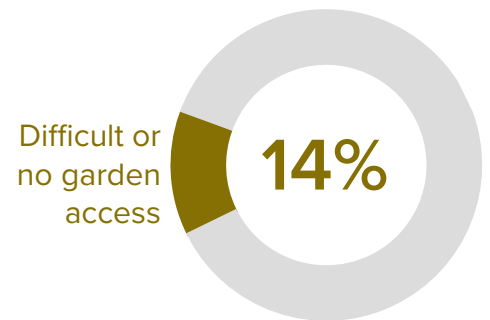


Inequalities in Garden Access

Did some find it more difficult to access a garden than others?

Difficulties in Accessing a Garden

We looked at how easy or difficult people found it to visit different places during lockdown, including private or shared gardens at home. Most respondents reported having easy access to a garden during lockdown, but a group of respondents reported having either no garden to access or finding it difficult to access a garden during this time. More than 1 in 10 reported difficult or no garden access.

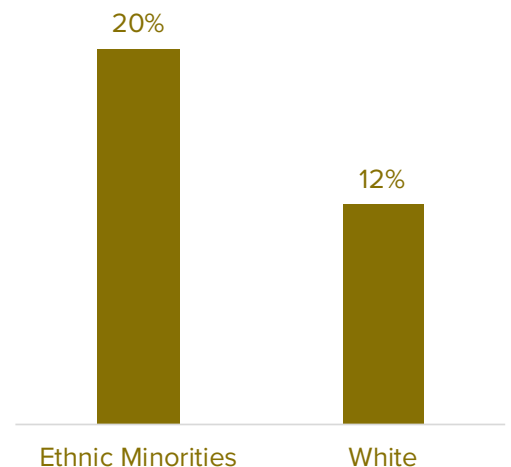


“ I desperately wish I had a garden, but I don’t... There is a communal garden but I felt unsafe there a lot of the time

Income and Garden Access

The difficulty and inability to access a garden was compared for those who had a high income (total annual household income of £30,000+) or a low income (£29,999 or less). Almost twice as many low income respondents reported difficult or no access compared with high income respondents.

% with Difficult/No Access



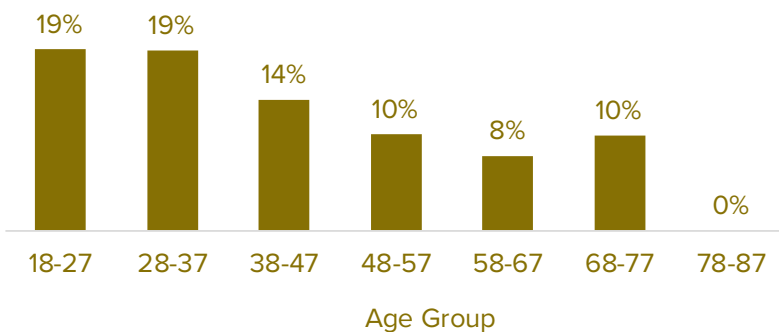
Ethnicity and Garden Access

Almost twice as many ethnic minority respondents found it difficult or impossible to access a garden during lockdown compared with white respondents.

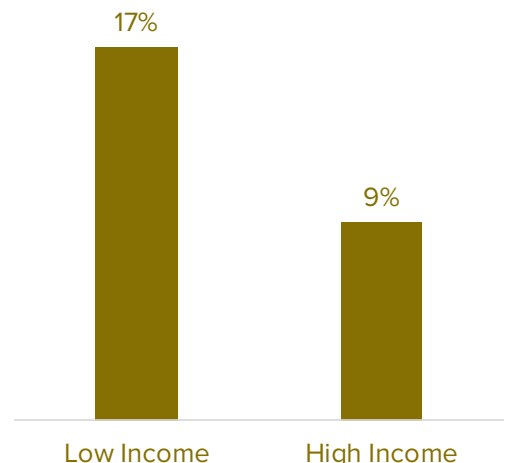
Age and Garden Access

There was a significant association between age and garden access, with younger respondents finding it more difficult or impossible to access a garden. The greatest difficulties were reported for those under 47 years of age.

% with Difficult/No Access



% with Difficult/No Access



Note: All differences and associations presented in this report are statistically significant

Wellbeing & Garden Visits

Was garden use associated with wellbeing improvements?

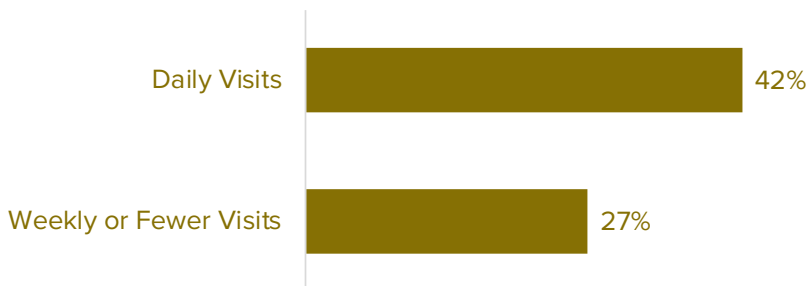
How Respondents Felt during Lockdown

Respondents were asked to rate how often they felt “happy & cheerful” and “anxious & depressed” during lockdown. Whilst around a third (36%) of respondents reported feeling happy & cheerful frequently during lockdown, 46% only felt happy & cheerful sometimes and 19% rarely felt happy & cheerful. Almost a quarter of respondents felt anxious & depressed frequently during lockdown (24%) and around a third (31%) felt anxious & depressed sometimes.

Wellbeing & Garden Use

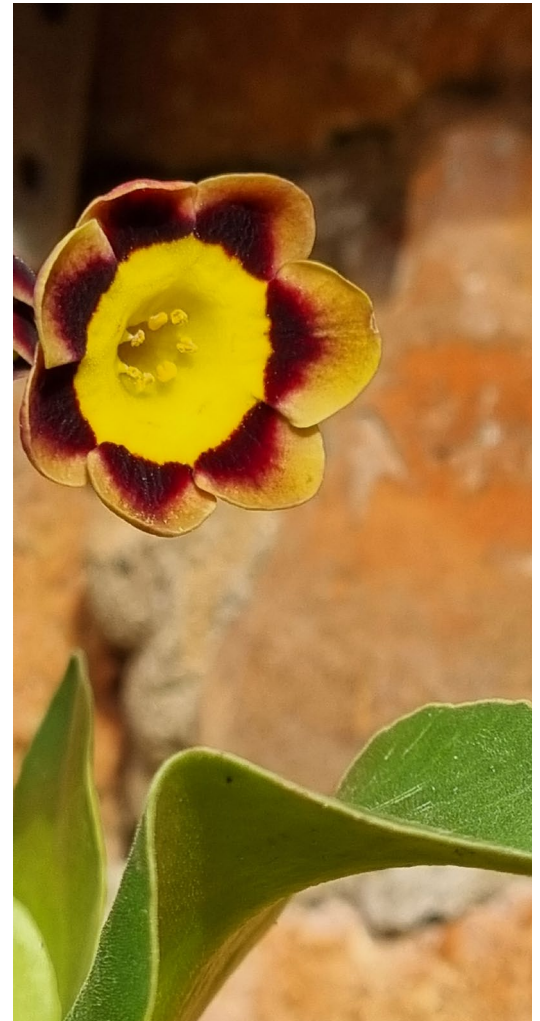
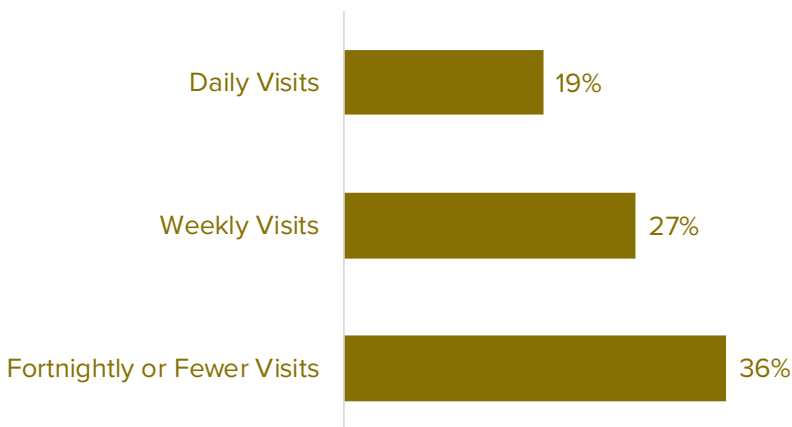
Correlational analyses showed that the more respondents visited their gardens, the more happy & cheerful they felt. Those visiting their garden daily felt happy & cheerful more often than those who visited weekly or less.

% Frequently Feeling Happy & Cheerful



More frequent garden visits were also significantly associated with how anxious & depressed respondents felt during lockdown. Those visiting their garden fortnightly or less reported feeling substantially more anxious and depressed than those who visited more often.

% Frequently Feeling Anxious & Depressed



“ Although I often felt weighed down by the situation... I nevertheless felt incredibly lucky... I have a husband to share life experiences with [&] a small (rented) garden to find a piece of heaven in

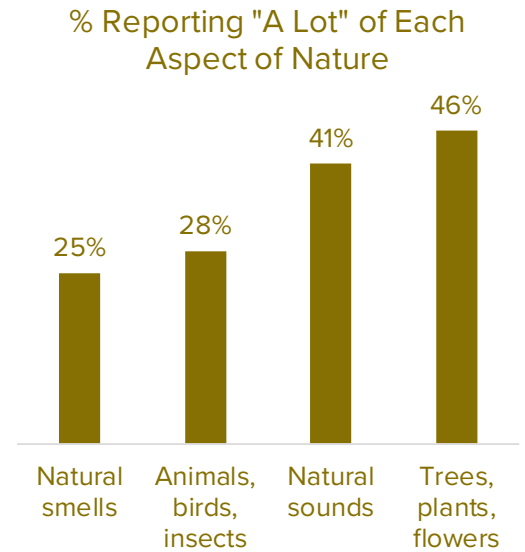
Nature in the Garden

Was nature in the garden associated with wellbeing?

Level of Nature in the Garden

Respondents were asked to name their favourite natural place to go during lockdown and 189 named their garden. These respondents answered questions about their gardens and the level of nature in them, which varied between respondents. Some described “a paved courtyard” that was “not particularly nature filled”, and others described gardens “full of flowers, green, and birds”.

But respondents generally reported high levels of nature in their gardens, with 47% rating their gardens as containing a lot of nature overall. The most frequently reported aspects of nature were trees, plants and flowers, and natural sounds such as birdsong and rustling leaves.

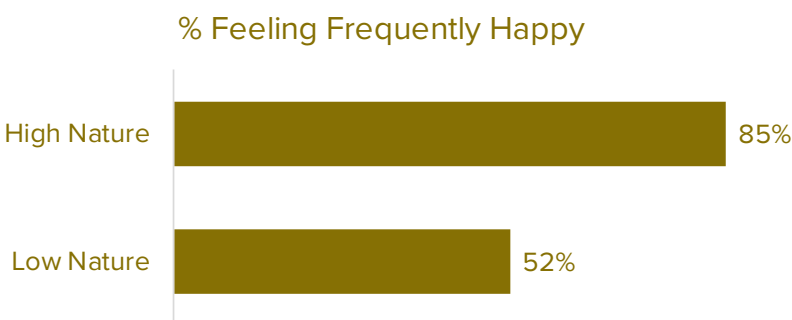


“ Without access to nature nearby I would have really struggled during lockdown

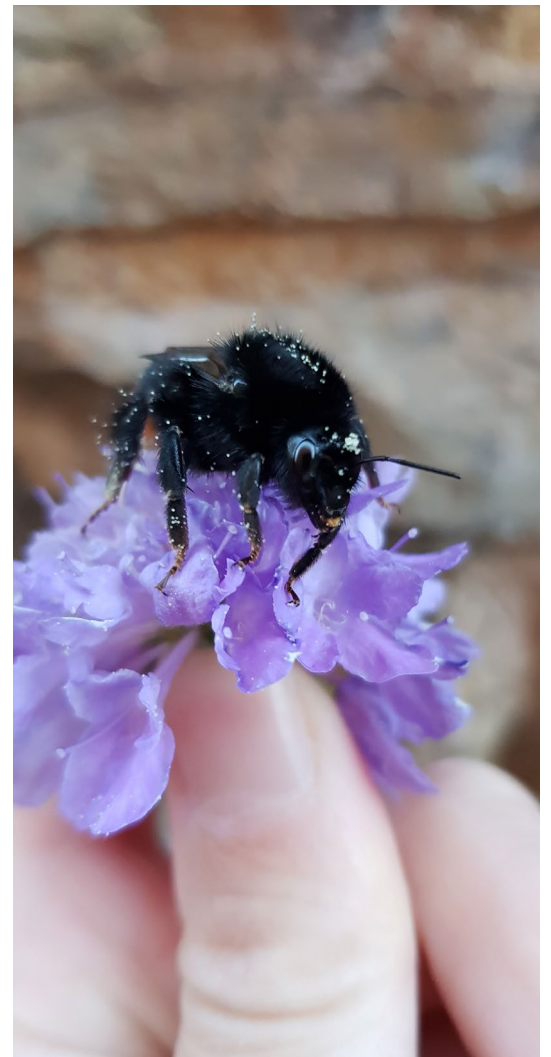


Nature and Wellbeing

Analyses showed that the more nature people had in their gardens, the happier they felt. A third more respondents reported feeling frequently happy when they had high nature in their garden, compared with lower levels of nature.



Out of the different aspects of nature, natural sounds, smells and the presence of animals, birds and insects, were most strongly associated with happiness in gardens.



The Research Team

This research underlying this report was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and conducted by the following multidisciplinary team of researchers.

From the University of Surrey:



Professor Birgitta Gatersleben
Project Lead and Director of Environmental Psychology Research Group



Dr Emma White
Research fellow in environmental psychology, and garden designer and writer



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Professor of Technology in Society in the School of Hospitality and Tourism Management



Dr Sarah Golding
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From the University of Plymouth:



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From Natural England:



Dr Beth Brockett
Social Science lead for Natural England's People and Nature Survey



Dr Cheryl Willis
Principal Adviser in the Connecting People with Nature Programme

Thank you to all our respondents & their kind remarks:

“

It was nice to think about nature and how this really helped me during lockdown

“

Great survey thank you... I felt relieved for answering the questions

“

Thank you, it is good to know people are concerned about our well-being

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