

MANOR WOODS VALLEY – THE FUTURE

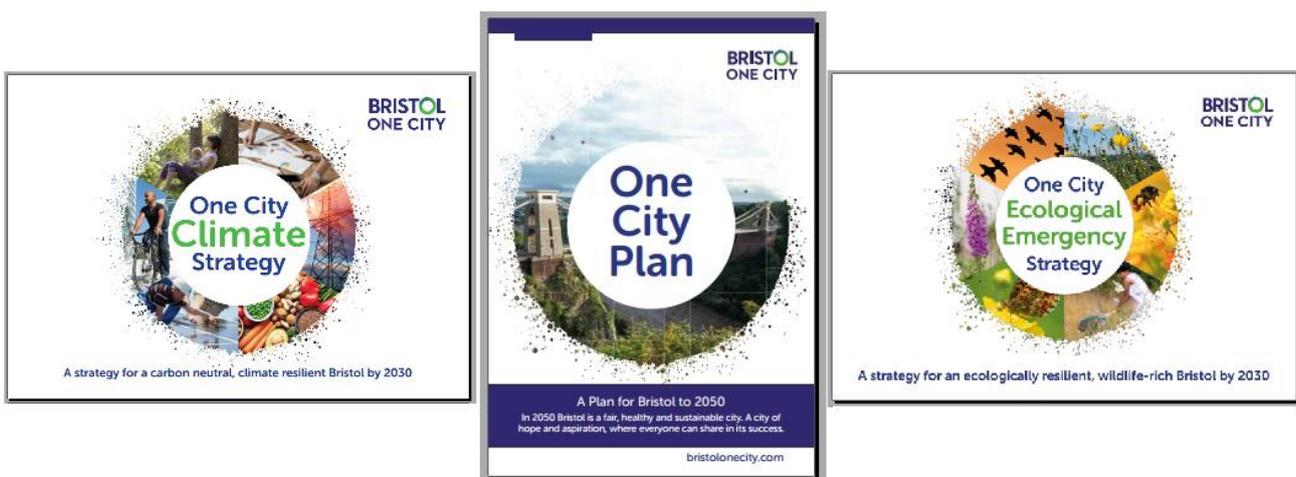
As a relatively large, naturalistic and varied greenspace, Manor Woods Valley has an important role to play in the future environmental and human well-being of South Bristol and the wider city.

The Drivers

A climate emergency was declared in Bristol in November 2018, when Bristol City Council (BCC) backed an ambitious pledge for the city to become carbon neutral by 2030 - 20 years earlier than previously agreed. Bristol's Environmental Sustainability Board came together to develop the One City Climate Strategy, which was released on 26 February 2020. The strategy is comprehensive, addressing both the direct and indirect sources of the emissions that are responsible for climate change. It looks at the wider carbon footprints of residents and businesses caused by the things we buy from around the world. The strategy considers some of the ways to reduce this broader footprint.

The first draft of the 'Bristol One City Plan' was published in January 2019. The Plan describes where the city wants to be by 2050 under five themes; connectivity, economy, environment, health and wellbeing, homes and communities, and learning and skills.

On 4 Feb 2020, Bristol became the first major city to declare an Ecological Emergency in response to escalating threats to wildlife and ecosystems. The declaration built on the declaration of the climate emergency two years earlier and recognised these two threats to our wellbeing. Priorities include looking at ways to stop wildlife habitats from being destroyed and ensuring that remaining habitats are protected, connected and restored. By 2030, 30% of land in Bristol will be managed in a sustainable way that is sympathetic to wildlife and the amount of wildlife will have doubled, both targets that were brought forward from 2050 as previously published in the One City Plan. The earlier target to double tree cover by 2050, was brought forward to 2046.



The Manor Woods Valley Group (MWVG) believes that Manor Woods Valley can contribute to many of the aforementioned themes and visions. To this end the Group has prepared a document; 'Bristol's Environmental Emergencies and Manor Woods Valley Group's Response - An Action Plan'. In addition to considering the climate and ecological

emergencies, the Plan also considers the impacts and implications of the Covid-19 epidemic and how it highlighted how important having access to green spaces was to the public. The Black Lives Matter movement has highlighted racial injustices and inequalities at all levels of society. It is notable that Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) people are largely absent from the governance structures of Friends of Parks Groups, National Nature Reserves and environmental groups. They have also been disproportionately affected by the Covid-19 epidemic. The Plan was prepared as a supplement to the main Manor Woods Valley Management Plan.

Actions contained within the Plan define how MWVG will help to contribute to the alleviation of these situations. This plan also takes in to account priorities identified as a result of a members consultation held at the group's inaugural public meeting in July 2019 and actions taken since that time. Following the hiatus caused by Covid-19, MWVG intends to 'build back better' in response to the emergencies. Reduced emissions from fossil fuels, cleaner air and increased interest in nature, active travelling, greenspaces, gardening and food-growing, community volunteering, acts of kindness, etc. are features of the Covid-19 lockdown that the group would like to see continue in the future.

Representation

MWVG remains sceptical of the 'friends of parks' model because it tends to be unrepresentative of local communities. The group feels that people of all backgrounds need to be involved in decision-making about how our green spaces will contribute to climate stabilisation and nature recovery. As a signatory of the Bristol Equalities Charter, MWVG conducted a survey of the make-up of its existing members and supporters and of users of Manor Woods Valley, and of the local communities. The group is currently seeking advice from community representatives and leaders on strategies for identifying and removing barriers to participation.

Climate Emergency

A permanent reduction in emissions from fossil fuels will have the greatest impact on attempts to avert global human-made global warming. A significant contribution can be made by a requirement for new developments anywhere in the city to avoid the use of CO2-emitting heating systems and by a requirement to install electric vehicle charging points. For each new building development in the communities surrounding Manor Woods Valley, MWVG challenges both developers and the planning authority to build for carbon neutrality.

Health and Wellbeing

The role that green-spaces and woodlands can play in improving people's wellbeing has been the focus of a growing body of research. Studies have shown that parks and urban green spaces deliver health and well-being benefits. Researchers have calculated that outdoor exercise delivers many billions of pounds worth of health and well-being benefits to people in the UK each year. It has been reported that living in an urban area with green spaces has a long-lasting positive impact on people's mental well-being. It has been calculated that more than eight million people each week took at least 30 minutes of "green exercise", but the Woodland Trust estimates that only 14% of the UK's population had "easy access to trees" within 500m of their home.

Just five minutes of exercise in a "green space" such as a park can boost mental health, UK researchers have claimed. They found vast improvements in mood and self-esteem, especially amongst the young and the mentally-ill. A bigger effect was seen with exercise in an area that also contained water - such as a lake or river. The study leader concluded that those who were generally inactive, or stressed, or with mental illness would probably benefit the most from "green exercise". The mental health charity Mind, said that the research was further evidence that even a short period of "green exercise" could provide a low cost and drug-free therapy to help improve mental well-being.

Finish researchers have identified a link between the lack of regular contact with the rural and natural environment and an increase in the number of cases of allergies and asthma. They found that *Acinetobacter* bacteria, that play an important role in the development and maintenance of the immune system, occur in greater abundance in vegetative environments, such as forests and agricultural land, rather than built-up areas and water bodies.

Researchers claim that the relationship between green space and human health suggest that our whole neuroendocrine system has evolved over millennia to respond positively to environments that are seen as providing what we need to live and thrive, and that we are hard-wired to respond the natural environment that is biologically part of our system.

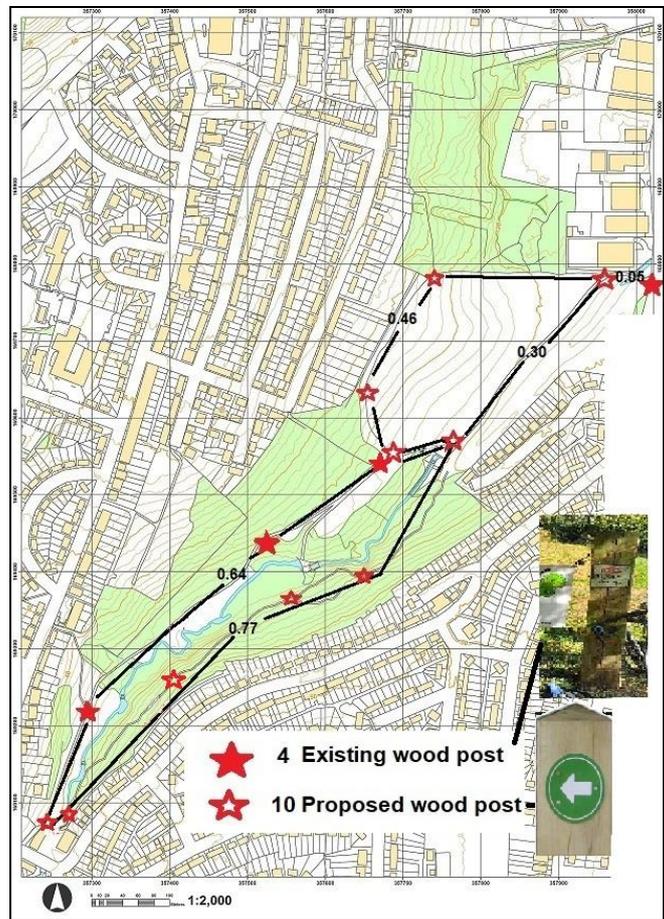
At the other end of the age spectrum, a study involving older people across the UK, found that those who lived within 10 minutes of local shops, services and green spaces doubled the chances of an older person achieving the recommended minimum amount of physical activity, that is 2.5 hours each week.

In conclusion; biochemists recognize 13 different vitamins that are essential to human well-being; however. Manor Woods Valley is rich in a 14th – vitamin N – N for nature! In Japan, the health benefits of spending time in forests has its own word, shinrinyoku, which means "forest bathing". Whilst Manor Woods Valley can hardly be described as a forest, it is easily possible to find quiet areas within the woodland, in which to meditate, discover mindfulness or indulge in shinrinyoku; and, of course, absorb vitamin N.

The MWVG encourages and supports the Forest of Avon Trust's wellbeing courses in Manor Woods Valley. The Trust works with disadvantaged groups. They meet regularly on the site, undertaking a range of field activities, from ephemeral art works, plant walks and field cook-outs, to heavier coppicing work during the winter months, under the guidance of the MWVG.

But is the growing volume of studies, evidence and grassroots support making a difference to the way certain conditions or symptoms are treated? Certainly, the chief medical officers for England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland have written: "Across the physical activity sector, we need to build on the diversity of opportunities to be active including... exercising in a natural environment." Well, there are signs of movement in this area; the MWVG is a participant in the Bristol, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire Green Social Prescribing Programme. It is also in contact with other influencers in health care policy within South Bristol and the wider city, with the aim of encouraging local medical practitioners to 'prescribe nature' when appropriate, especially in the light of the negative physical and mental health impacts of Covid-19.

In the spring of 2021, the MWVG successfully applied for a grant from Travelwest Active Travel Community Grant to part-fund the way-marking of a 2.5km exercise circuit in Manor Woods Valley. It is hoped that this trail will encourage more people to partake in activity on the site.



The exercise trail around Manor Woods Valley

Education

In the case of the young, a report championing the use of 'forest schools', quotes research by the Forestry Commission that showed lessons and activities within a woodland appeared to have a beneficial effect for children with emotional or behavioural problems.

Despite the aforementioned, a 2009 report by Natural England found that only 10% of children played in woodlands, compared with 40% of their parents' generation. The disconnection of an increasingly urbanised society with the natural world has been described as "nature-deficit disorder". The phrase, coined by Richard Louv, US author of *Last Child in the Wood*, primarily focuses on how the current generation of children's contact and understanding of nature has "changed radically" from their parents' and grandparents' experiences. The author acknowledges that "nature deficit disorder" had no clinical basis, but points out that his research shows that access to a natural environment forms part of a "balanced diet" in a child's development.

The Sowing the Seeds report of 2011 identified the perceived risks associated with children playing outside without supervision as a reason for the “nature deficit”. “Children today do not enjoy the same everyday freedom of movement as previous generations,” it concluded.

Various groups are trying to redress the balance. Play England – a Bristol based national organisation, that focuses on giving children access to free play areas, has funding from Natural England to run a programme to re-engage children with the natural world. “Fundamentally, we believe that kids should be outside playing for a good proportion of the day because it is how you can stay happy, less stressed but it is also good in a whole range of ways,” said Play England director Cath Prisk. She added however that: “Research we carried out ... showed that parents think taking their kids to the park is something you do as a treat instead of something you do everyday”, also “I have a dog, and if I did not take my dog into the park two or three times a day, I would be considered a very bad dog owner..” and “There is a growing body of research that says getting outside regularly is good for kids, but that is fighting a massive zeitgeist, which says that if you let your kid out of your sight, then they will come to harm.”

As well as the devastating toll on health, Covid-19 has hugely disrupted the education of children and young adults, with an even more severe impact on disadvantaged communities. Outdoor education offers a partial solution to the pressures of social distancing and consequent demand for teaching space in schools and colleges in the future. It also offers an opportunity to improve the education of current and future generations in all disciplines. An entitlement for all young people to learn and work with nature in local green spaces could be an unintended but positive consequence of the current health emergency and the education sector’s response to the climate and ecological emergencies.

As a contribution, during the early summer of 2021, MWVG funded a Forest School pilot within Manor Woods Valley. A number of local school children benefitted from a short series of Sunday morning activity sessions under the guidance of a qualified Forest School tutor. The children partook in activities such as wood whittling, fire-making and cooking, all in an outdoor environment based in The Classroom area within Allotment Wood. Following the success of this pilot, MVG is seeking funding to extend the Forest School so as to benefit many more young people.



Children involved in Forest School activities in Manor Woods Valley

Ecology Emergency

All green and blue spaces, and not just parks and nature reserves, need to contribute to the recovery of nature and the stabilisation of the climate. The combined impact that these areas can make would be further amplified by the creation and maintenance of nature corridors between them. MWVG has pledged to play its part in trying to solve Bristol's ecological emergency, but as at this time (July 2021) the group is frustrated that there is still no definition of some fundamental terms within the emergency's strategy document published in September 2020, for example, what does 'double the amount of wildlife' mean, and no base-lines have been established against which to measure progress.

The main aim of the MWVG is to preserve and increase the ecological diversity and holding capacity of Manor Woods Valley. Many of the works that it is engaged with have made a noticeable difference in these respects. For example, Manor Wood Orchard and nearby areas now contains an exceptional population of Slow-worms, the One Tree per Child plantation is actively managed by the group, wildflower meadows have been established and fruit and other trees are regularly added to the site.



Wildflowers established by seeding and regular cutting in The Orchard Triangle