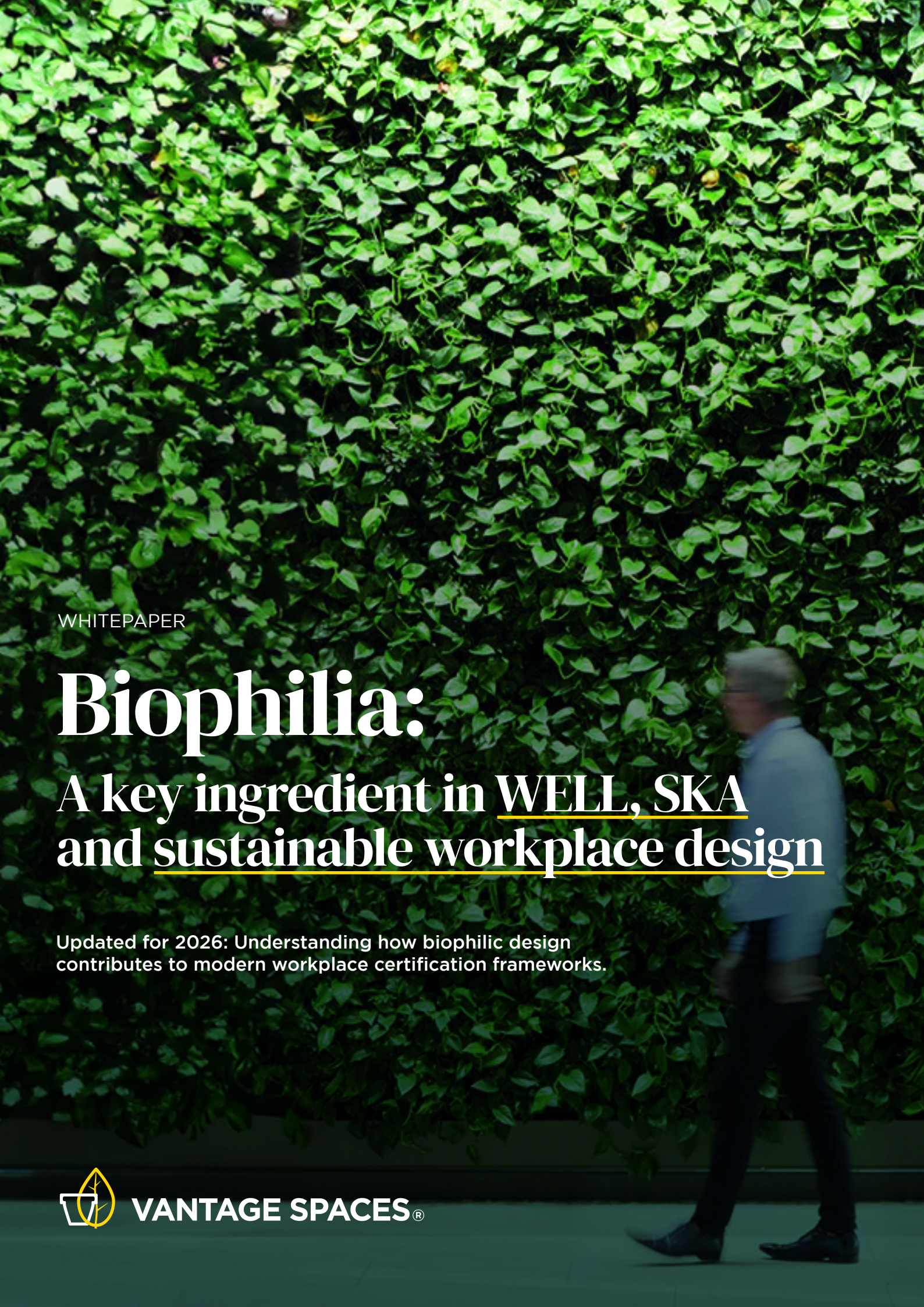


WHITEPAPER

Biophilia:

A key ingredient in WELL, SKA and sustainable workplace design

Updated for 2026: Understanding how biophilic design contributes to modern workplace certification frameworks.

VANTAGE SPACES®



In recent years, awareness of the relationship between buildings, sustainability and human wellbeing has continued to grow. Organisations are increasingly seeking workplaces that support employee health, improve environmental performance and create more engaging experiences for occupants.

This has led to wider adoption of building certification frameworks such as WELL, SKArating, BREEAM and LEED. While each framework has a different focus, all recognise the importance of creating spaces that perform better for both people and the environment.

Biophilic design continues to play an important role within this evolution. By strengthening the connection between people and nature, biophilia can contribute towards workplace wellbeing, sustainability objectives and recognised certification requirements.

Profitable businesses invest in wellbeing

While the main focus of these standards is to enhance sustainability and wellbeing, they do have economic benefits too. They can naturally help to reduce running costs, but beyond this, new research and insights from neurosciences, endocrinology and other fields is helping to further prove the business case for green buildings and biophilic design. There is clear evidence that introducing biophilia into everyday office life can help to lower stress, improve cognitive function, enhance creativity, and promote happiness.

(Read our whitepaper on the effect of nature on the brain!)

Although attaining certification is an investment of time and money, considering that workforce is probably one of the greatest costs for most businesses, it stands to reason that even marginal gains in productivity would have a significant positive impact on the bottom line. So, the economic reasons for aspiring to a SKA or WELL standard extend beyond simply reducing the running costs of the building.



In a study* looking at worker experience in green buildings vs non-green buildings, researchers found that building occupants in high-performing, green-certified office environments:

Scored 26%

higher on tests of cognitive function

Had 30%

fewer symptoms of sick building syndrome

Had 6%

higher sleep quality scores than those in high-performing but non-certified buildings.

Since the publication of our original whitepaper, wellbeing has become an increasingly important consideration across major building standards. Frameworks such as WELL, BREEAM and LEED now place greater emphasis on occupant experience, resilience and long-term quality of life, reflecting growing recognition of the connection between healthy people and high-performing workplaces.

*The Impact of Green Buildings on Cognitive Function, Harvard T.H Chan School of Public Health's Centre for Health and the Global Environment

Let's have a look at the WELL and SKA standards in more detail: What is WELL?

Biophilia remains part of the WELL Mind concept and is assessed through dedicated biophilia features that recognise both the quality and quantity of nature incorporated into a project.



Qualitative biophilia

WELL recognises that the value of biophilia extends beyond the simple presence of plants. Qualitative assessment considers how natural elements are thoughtfully integrated into the workplace through design, spatial planning and occupant experience. This may include planting, natural materials, nature-inspired forms, visual connections with nature and opportunities for interaction with natural elements.

Quantitative biophilia

WELL also includes measurable requirements relating to biophilia. These create objective criteria for assessing how nature has been incorporated into a space and encourage project teams to think strategically about indoor planting provision and overall biophilic design.

Biophilic design can contribute towards WELL certification objectives, but projects must satisfy the relevant requirements and documentation criteria for each applicable feature.

The 10 concepts of the WELL Standard

- Air
- Water
- Light
- Nourishment
- Movement
- Thermal comfort
- Sound
- Materials
- Mind
- Community



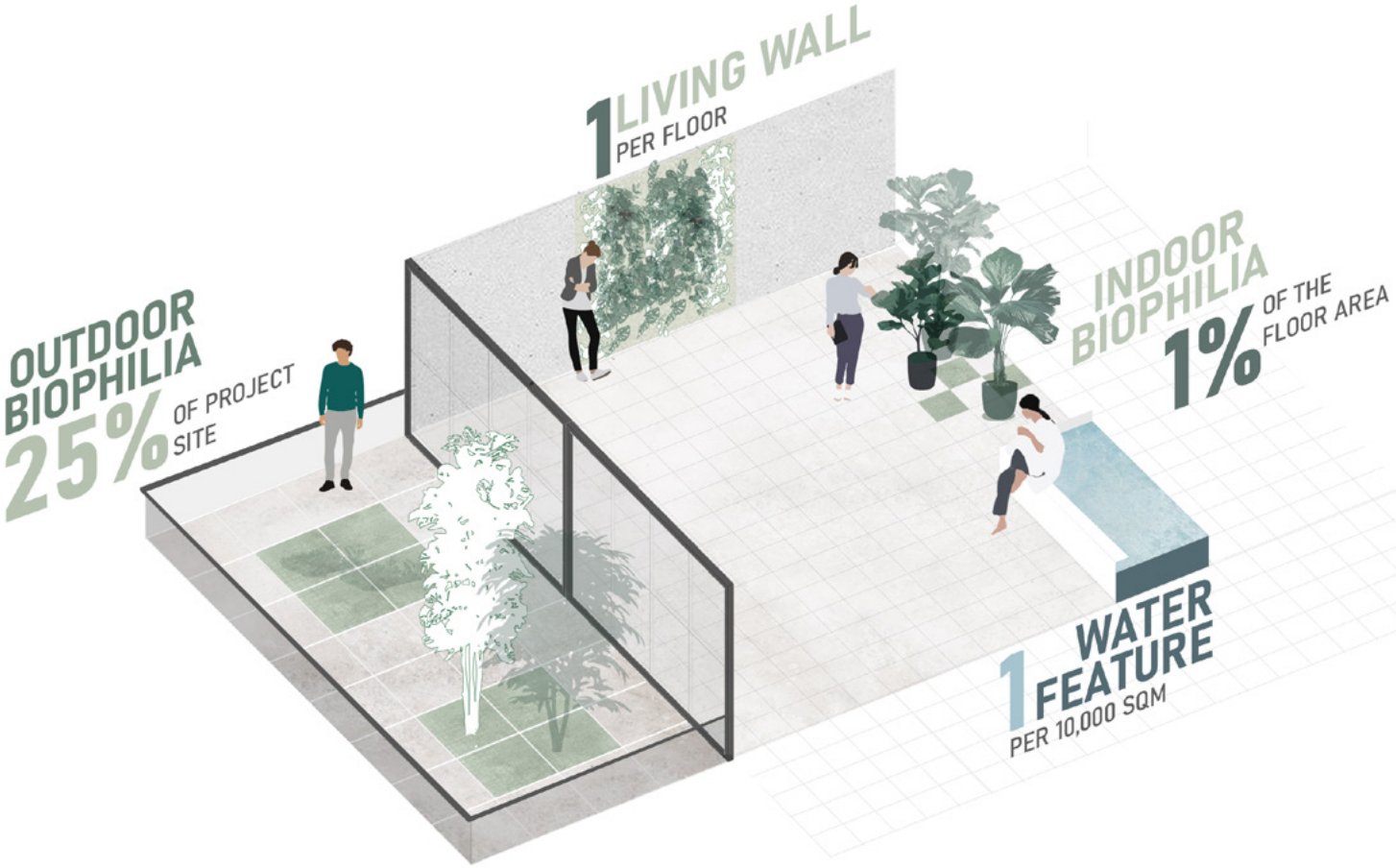
WELL standard indoor biophilia requirements

Within WELL's quantitative biophilia feature, interior planting may be incorporated into the design of a space according to the following criteria:

A. Potted plants or planted beds cover at least **1% of floor area per floor.**

B. A plant wall per floor, covering a wall area equal or greater than **2% of the floor area**, or covering the largest of the available walls, whichever is greater.

These requirements form part of WELL's quantitative approach to biophilia.
As with all WELL features, project teams must satisfy the applicable feature requirements and verification criteria in order for the feature to contribute towards certification.



From plants to measurable outcomes

One of the most important developments in recent years has been a growing appreciation that biophilia can be both experienced and measured.

For designers, occupiers and sustainability consultants, this allows conversations to move beyond aesthetics and towards evidence-based workplace performance. WELL encourages project teams to consider not only how much planting is provided, but how effectively nature has been integrated into the wider design strategy.

What is SKA?

SKA rating continues to be an important environmental assessment framework for commercial fitouts. Since our original whitepaper was published, the scheme has evolved through the introduction of Offices Environmental 2.0, strengthening its focus on environmental impact, circularity and net zero alignment.

The updated scheme focuses on environmental performance while a future dedicated Social & Wellbeing scheme is planned separately.

The wider certification landscape

BREEAM Version 7 has introduced stronger requirements around biodiversity, resilience, carbon performance and wellbeing. LEED V5 has been restructured around three core themes: decarbonisation, quality of life, and ecological conservation and restoration.

Together, these developments demonstrate a growing consensus across the industry: workplaces should perform well environmentally whilst also supporting the people who occupy them.

Case study:

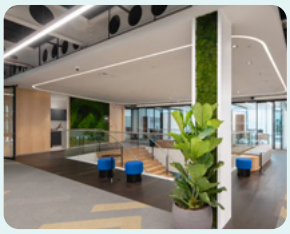
A Gold-standard SKA rating for Montagu

We worked with Morgan Lovell on the office fitout for Montagu, a leading private equity firm overlooking Tower Bridge.

Biophilic elements were integrated throughout the space to support staff wellbeing, encourage people back into the office and aid retention and recruitment. Moss walls, panels and carefully positioned planting bring nature into the workplace, while planted dividers soften open-plan areas and help reduce noise.

The completed space achieved a Gold-standard SKA rating.







The 8 SKA good practice measures

The SKA guide sets out over 100 Good Practice Measures across eight different areas that can be implemented to achieve a SKA rating

- Energy
- Water
- Materials
- CO_2
- Pollution
- Wellbeing
- Waste
- Transport

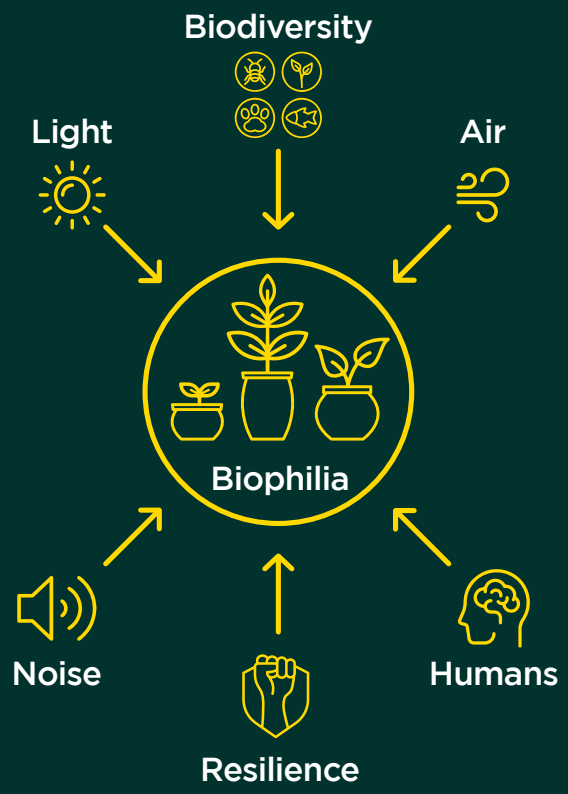
A holistic approach to green building design

While certification frameworks continue to evolve, they increasingly recognise the interconnected relationship between environmental performance, resilience, biodiversity and occupant wellbeing. Biophilia often sits at the centre of these objectives.

For example, elements focusing on the quality of lighting and maximising natural light are connected with biophilic elements – an office built with lighting requirements essential for living plants is going to benefit humans and vice versa!

Similarly, where elements focus on air quality, this can be linked to the proven ability of plants to remove toxic Volatile Organic Compounds (VOCs) from the air around them. (Read our whitepaper on the power of air-purifying plants!)

Noise levels are another element that planting can assist with by helping to reduce them in open plan spaces. Implementing an improvement measure in one area will often have a pleasing knock-on effect in another.













Materials matter

Today, material selection is increasingly linked to embodied carbon, circular economy principles and net zero targets, all of which are receiving greater emphasis within modern certification schemes.

WELL and SKA also encourage the use of sustainable materials and recycling wherever possible, which is an ethos that we share at Vantage. No material is perfect of course, but some are more sustainable than others. Wherever possible, our planters are either made with natural materials such as silica and crushed stone, or recycled materials such as recycled marine debris and recycled synthetic cork. The materials are lightweight, robust, easy to transport and recyclable. We also favour suppliers who are nature-friendly like us – one of our suppliers manufactures their pots with 100% pure wind energy from their own turbine!

The benefits of WELL and SKA

Clearly, one of the main benefits of complying with either or both of these rating systems is a more sustainable workplace, but business leaders invariably find that the benefits go far beyond reducing one's impact on the environment.

Meeting standards such as WELL and SKA can help to boost brand image, improve health, increase wellbeing and performance, attract and retain talent, and encourage presence in the office when it is often no longer mandatory. It also engenders a sense of pride and belonging amongst employees – something which is intangible, hard to quantify, and even harder to create.

The benefits of healthier, more sustainable workplaces

- Reduce running costs
- Enhance brand image
- Attract and retain talent
- Encourage office presence
- More productive workforce
- Reduce impact on environment
- Engender sense of pride and belonging
- Healthier office work atmosphere



The compelling business case for enhancing wellbeing

Average absenteeism in the UK is estimated at between four and six days per employee each year.

According to the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, the single largest cause of long-term absence from work is mental ill health (59%), followed closely by stress (54%).

Deloitte estimates that mental ill health costs UK employers between £33bn and £42bn per year.

The World Green Building Council says "productivity improvements of 8%-11% are not uncommon as a result of better air quality" in office environments.

A study published in the Journal of Building and Environment found that in a multi-office survey, WELL certification showed a series of significant benefits:

A near 30%

improvement in overall satisfaction with the workplace, which jumped from 42% to 70%.

26%

overall increase in reported wellbeing scores.

10%

increase in mental health and a 2% increase in physical health.

10 point

jump in median productivity scores

The direction of travel across WELL, SKA, BREEAM and LEED is clear. Organisations are increasingly expected to demonstrate not only environmental responsibility, but also their commitment to employee wellbeing, resilience and long-term workplace performance. Biophilic design can play an important role in helping achieve these objectives.



If you are pursuing WELL certification, targeting a SKA rating assessment, exploring BREEAM or LEED requirements, or simply looking to create a healthier and more engaging workplace, our specialists can help.

From biophilic design strategies and planting schemes to moss walls, preserved planting and workplace greening programmes, we work closely with architects, designers and occupiers to create spaces that connect people with nature.

Get in touch with one of our experts for an informal conversation about your next project. We'd love to help transform your space.