



Equity in access to urban 'green spaces'

What do we know?

People from all walks of life place a high value on access to nature and green space, with only 5% of adults saying that it has never been important to them (The Ramblers, 2020). Urban residents value parks and green spaces more than other people (Fields in Trust, 2019). There is currently 32.94 square metres of green space provision per person in the UK, but 2.69 million people do not live within a 10-minute walk of green space (Fields in Trust, 2020).

One in eight households has no access to a private or shared garden and this is particularly likely to be true of people living in urban areas – 21% of Londoners do not have a garden. In England, Black people are nearly four times as likely as White people to have no access to outdoor space at home. Even comparing people of similar age, social grade and living situation, those of Black ethnicity are 2.4 times less likely than those of White ethnicity to have a private garden (Office for National Statistics, 2020).

When it comes to publicly accessible green space, this inequality persists. Almost 40% of people from Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) backgrounds live in the most green-space deprived areas, compared to 14% of white people (Friends of the Earth, 2020). People that identify as BAME are less likely to live within a 5-minute walk of a green space than people that identify as white (39% compared to 58%), less likely to report that there are good walking routes where they live (38% compared to 52%) and less likely to report a variety of different green spaces within a walking distance of where they live (46% compared to 58%) (The Ramblers, 2020). People from low income households are also less likely to have good access to green space.

People on low incomes are less likely to live within a 5-minute walk of a green space (46% of those with an annual household income under £15,000 compared to 70% of people with an annual household income over £35,000), less likely to live somewhere where the streets are green (27% compared to 53%), and less likely to report that there are good walking routes where they live (42% compared to 59%) (The Ramblers, 2020). Research in Sheffield found that urban deprivation was more likely to affect people's contact with nature for wellbeing than ethnicity; parks, neighbourhoods, roadsides and through-routes in deprived areas were more often described as having rubbish and not being looked after, which put some people off walking, cycling and visiting green spaces locally (Improving Wellbeing through Urban Nature, 2019).

In England and Wales, houses and flats within 100 metres of public green space are an average of £2,500 more expensive than they would be if they were more than 500 metres away (Public Health England, 2020). This housing premium can leave communities vulnerable to displacement over time as the presence of green space prices them out of their neighbourhood, a process that has been described as “eco-gentrification” (Kabisch & van den Bosch, 2017).

This inequality in access is reflected in trends for visits to urban green space. There had been a notable increase in adults spending time outdoors at least once a week in the decade leading up to 2019, up from 54% to 65%. However, there were larger proportions of infrequent visitors among the oldest age groups, people from lower socio-economic groups and people from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds. 69% of White people reported visiting natural spaces at least once a week compared to 41% of Black people and 38% of people from an Asian ethnic background. 74% of people from the highest socio-economic groups reported visiting natural spaces at least once a week compared to 53% of people from the lowest socio-economic groups (Natural England, 2019).

The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of green space: in a survey undertaken in July, 46% of people said that they were spending more time outside than they had previously. 50% of adults reported a visit to urban green spaces in the previous month (Natural England, 2020a).

However, it has also exacerbated existing inequalities in access to green space. Evidence from Scotland suggests that use of green space was polarised during lockdown: while some people increased their frequency of visits, many people made fewer or no visits to local green space and the most marked reduction in time spent in green space was among older people. People from higher social grades were more likely to report increased use of green spaces and associated benefits for mental health. People identifying as BAME were more likely to report greater benefits to their mental health from green space and open space during lockdown than people identifying as white (S&SR Environment and Spaces Group, 2020).

Evidence from England suggests a similar picture. Natural England found that when their survey respondents own estimates of how often they visit natural spaces on average over a year and how often they visited during the spring 2020 lockdown, there were larger differences for low income groups, those with lower levels of education, and those living in the most deprived areas (Natural England, 2020d). 60% of children were found to have spent less time outdoors since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic but this varied across the population: 71% of children from ethnic minority backgrounds reported spending less time outside compared to 57% of white children and 73% of children from households with annual income below £17,000 spent less time outdoors, compared with 57% from households with an annual income above this level (Natural England, 2020b).





What are the barriers?

Inadequate provision of green space is an obvious barrier to accessing its benefits. However, there are additional barriers that may mean that people are prevented from benefiting from the green space close to their home.

Habits formed in childhood often have consequences for adult engagement in parks and green spaces. A study of the benefits of green spaces for wellbeing in Sheffield found that the presence or absence of positive childhood memories associated with green spaces had a significant influence on green space use throughout adulthood (Improving Wellbeing through Urban Nature, 2019).

If people do not feel comfortable in their communities, they will not feel comfortable using their local parks and green spaces. Social isolation, loneliness and illness can be barriers to accessing nature; these problems are more common in deprived areas and sometimes prevent people from all backgrounds from leaving the house and going to local green spaces (Improving Wellbeing through Urban Nature, 2019). A study in Glasgow found that perceptions of social cohesion and the level of integration and inclusion felt by individuals in their communities was an important predictor of park use. The belief that parks were dominated by unsupervised older children and adolescents was a barrier to green space use for some and led to increased supervision of younger children. The presence of racist graffiti or experiences of racist abuse were major barriers to the use of urban green space for some groups (Seaman et al, 2010).

Specific barriers may prevent people from some black or minority ethnic backgrounds from choosing to spend time in green space. The perception that these spaces are dominated by white people and the experience of racism in these spaces can have an impact for several generations, as people take their lead from their parents' use or lack of use of parks and green space. Not wanting to get clothes dirty, either because of the role that being well presented plays in value codes and identity or because of material poverty, may also disincentivise time spent in natural settings or outdoor play. For some people with a recent family history or lived experience of subsistence, nature can be associated with hardship and struggle rather than seen as a place for recreation and leisure. This idea can be reinforced by the historical trauma of colonialism and slavery (Collier, 2019).

The way that green spaces are designed can either reinforce or help to tackle these barriers. A study of two community gardens in London found that people from Asian and African ethnic backgrounds were less likely to be attracted to the 'wildness' of a green space than white participants; use of obvious symbolism was not necessarily a primary means of encouraging users from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds and appreciation was more dependent on the quality and good management of the gardens (Rishbeth, 2004). Some studies suggest that people from black and ethnic minority backgrounds are more likely to see natural spaces as spaces for large family or social gatherings, for example a picnic or a barbeque, than somewhere for individual recreation or exercise (Forest Research, 2006).

The Covid-19 pandemic has introduced additional barriers to spending time in green space for some people. In a survey of the general population conducted in July 2020, reasons given for not spending time in green space within the previous two weeks included concerns about catching or spreading Covid-19, concerns about over-crowding and inability to social distance, and concerns about breaking coronavirus restrictions. Worries and concerns about visiting green and natural spaces that are not specific to the pandemic included encountering anti-social behaviour or poorly maintained sites (Natural England, 2020a). The skills shortage in green space management may also contribute to these barriers, impacting the quality of green space. The Landscape Institute has called for greater investment in landscape skills - blending knowledge of the built and natural environment - as part of a green recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic. Structural issues in the sector, including an ageing workforce of limited diversity may also have an impact, impeding the introduction of new ideas and approaches which might make spaces more accessible and attractive to different demographics (The Landscape Institute, 2020).

New Economics Foundation's analysis of the People and Nature Survey found that, although 42% of British people believe that visiting local green and natural spaces like parks and beaches has become even more important to their wellbeing since the pandemic began, around 40% of people are concerned about overcrowding and not being able to keep a safe distance from others. 12.5% of people do not believe that their local green space is of a high enough standard to want to spend time in (Chapman & Phagoora, 20 January 2021).

Pressure on urban green space is likely to grow in future as the UK population rises: by 2040 the amount of green space provision per person will have reduced by 7.6% and in over 100 local authority areas the provision per person will fall by more than 10% over that period (Fields in Trust, 2020).



Why does it matter?

People place a high value on access to green space (The Ramblers, 2020), so we know that it is important to individuals and families. However, access to green space is more than a 'nice to have' and has implications for many aspects of our lives.

Access to green space is linked with a wide range of social and environmental benefits which link to health and wellbeing (Public Health England, 2020):

- improving access to green space promotes healthy behaviours and connecting those spaces together can encourage active travel;
- improving social contacts and giving people a sense of familiarity and belonging;
- supporting the development of skills and capabilities, particularly for young people;
- mediating potential harms posed by the local environment, such as exposure to air pollution, the urban heat island effect, excessive noise, and flood risk.

Improving access to green space has the potential to improve health outcomes for the whole population but disadvantaged communities appear to accrue even greater health benefit from living in a greener environment. This means that urban green space can be an important tool for tackling health inequalities (Public Health England, 2020).

The quality and characteristics of a green space play an important role in producing this benefit for health and wellbeing. For example, a study of 12 urban parks in Bradford found that the level of biodiversity of a given park was a key determinant of the restorative benefits felt by users of that park (Wood et al, 2018).

Parks and green spaces also have a significant economic value. The Total Economic Value of parks and green spaces to an individual has been estimated at £30.24 per year, including benefits gained from using their local park and green space and non-use benefits such as the preservation of parks for future generations. The value is higher for individuals from lower socio-economic groups and people from black and minority ethnic backgrounds. The wellbeing value associated with frequent use of parks and green spaces is worth £34.2 billion per year to the UK adult population and is estimated to save the NHS £111 million per year through a reduction in GP visits (Fields in Trust, 2019).



What does good provision look like?

Natural England is in the process of developing new Green Infrastructure Standards. The evidence review published as part of this process suggests that the type, amount, proximity and quality of green infrastructure are key factors in the health and wellbeing outcomes that it produces.

While noting that the evidence base is incomplete, Natural England suggests that (Natural England, 2020c):

- Provision of a mix of green infrastructure types (e.g. publicly accessible green space such as parks and nature reserves, domestic and shared gardens, green routes and street trees) is most likely to be beneficial.
- Green spaces close to homes and workplaces are likely to be important, but accessibility is dependent on several factors and perception of proximity is as important as objective proximity.
- Better quality and well-maintained green infrastructure is associated with better health and wellbeing outcomes. However, the perception of quality is important and this can vary between people.
- The value of different types, amounts and locations of green infrastructure for health and wellbeing outcomes is likely to be highly contextual, meaning that a solution that works in one place may not work in another.



What does this mean for green space organisations?

The evidence presented in this review demonstrates that access to green space is an important social justice issue with implications for health and wellbeing and social participation.

Based on this evidence and the learning of the Task and Finish group convened by Natural England's National Outdoors for All Working Group, we recommend:

- 1. Reimagining parks to ensure that they meet the needs and desires of communities today.**
Green space organisations should work together to ensure that social equity is at the forefront of policy and practice across the sector, embedded in green space design and management and underpinned by a commitment to diversifying the workforce. This should include sharing good practice, while recognising that copy-and-pasting an approach from one neighbourhood to another may not work and contextualisation will be needed. The principles of community development should be applied across the green space sector, with significant resource committed to working with communities to design and improve green space provision.
- 2. Rebalancing the power in the management of green spaces and build better partnerships.**
This means organisations working together more effectively and working more closely with the communities they exist to benefit. Many people who would benefit most from green spaces are not being included in initiatives and competition for resources too often leads to a duplication of efforts. There should be increased focus on the needs of young people as park users and co-ordinated volunteering programmes to help Friends of Parks groups become more resilient and representative.
- 3. Integrating green space solutions into efforts to tackle major challenges such as health inequalities, climate change and biodiversity loss.**
This should include more support and training to help frontline health and care professionals embed activity in parks and green spaces into the service they provide to their clients. It should also include the integration of green space management into plans to tackle climate change through nature-based solutions, particularly in areas vulnerable to flooding, air pollution and extreme heat, which are more likely to affect those already suffering wider social inequalities.





**Want to get involved?
Feel free to contact us at
brumgrowingnetwork@theaws.org**