

# Research summary

Community green: using local spaces to tackle inequality and improve health



# Introduction

*Community green* investigates the inter-relationship between urban green space, inequality, ethnicity, health and wellbeing. It is the largest study of its kind in England.<sup>1</sup>

Some of the most acute effects of deprivation are felt by black and minority ethnic communities living on a low income in urban areas. The poor quality of their local environment has a considerable impact on their health and wellbeing.

People living in deprived urban areas recognise and appreciate the value of local green spaces, but they underuse the spaces that are most convenient because the spaces are often poor quality and feel unsafe. In this study, for instance, less than 1 per cent of people living in social housing reported using the green space on their estate.

Half of the people we interviewed said that they would take more exercise if the quality of their local green space was better. And 60 per cent said that if their local green space was more pleasant and they began to use it more, they would expect their physical health to improve. Forty-eight per cent thought it could improve their mental health and 46 per cent thought it would improve their relationships with family and friends.

The report concludes that improving urban green space represents an important and cost-effective opportunity for people to transform their local neighbourhoods and improve their quality of life. Local people are best placed to know the benefits that good quality green spaces could contribute to their community. But they have not always had the opportunity to direct improvements to their local environment. A changed political and economic landscape will include a fundamentally different relationship between local people and landowners, including registered social housing providers and local authorities. The most obvious opportunity is improving the open space on social housing estates.

1 Research carried out by OPENspace research centre, Edinburgh College of Art, in collaboration with Heriot-Watt University.

2 *Urban green nation: building the evidence base*, CAGE, 2010 [cabeurl.com/cf](http://cabeurl.com/cf)

3 [cabeurl.com/c1](http://cabeurl.com/c1) and [cabeurl.com/dn](http://cabeurl.com/dn)

4 *Fair society, healthy lives*, The Marmot Review, Strategic review of health inequalities in England post-2010, 2010.

5 *The health of minority ethnic groups*, Health survey for England, 2004 [cabeurl.com/c4](http://cabeurl.com/c4)

6 *Effect of exposure to natural environment on health inequalities: an observational population study*, Mitchell, R and Popham, F, *The Lancet*: 372, 2008.

# Background to the study

Sustained investment in recent years arrested the historic decline of public urban green spaces, especially parks. But even during this period, not everywhere benefitted equally.

This study follows earlier research commissioned by CAGE, *Urban green nation: building the evidence base*, which found that if you live in a deprived inner-city area, you have access to five times fewer public parks and good-quality general green space than people in more affluent areas.<sup>2</sup>

In this second piece of research, we focused on ethnicity because diversity is increasing and the majority of black and minority ethnic communities in the UK live in the most deprived wards in English inner-cities. The poverty rate for Britain's black and minority ethnic residents overall is 40 per cent, double the rate for white British people. Furthermore, child poverty is highest, up to 74 per cent, among Bangladeshi children.<sup>3</sup>

*Urban green nation* also revealed that in areas where more than 40 per cent of residents are black or minority ethnic, there is 11 times less green space than in areas where residents are largely white. And the spaces they do have are likely to be of a poorer quality.

People living on a low income in deprived urban areas are more likely to experience worse health and be less physically active.<sup>4</sup> Although where you live and the services you receive is intimately related to income, our research found a difference, by ethnicity, that was over and above what would be expected for level of income alone.

Bangladeshi and Pakistani people and African-Caribbean women, for instance, are more likely to report bad or very bad health compared to the general population.<sup>5</sup>

Green space has a proven track record in reducing the impact of deprivation, delivering better health and wellbeing and creating a strong community. The simple presence of green space is related to a reduced risk of serious problems like depression and lung disease. Living close to green space reduces mortality, which can help reduce the significant gap in life expectancy between rich and poor.<sup>6</sup>



# The study methodology

*Community green* is the second of two pieces of research commissioned by CABI to gauge the state of England's urban green space. This study examines the impact of the quality of local green spaces on the health and wellbeing of people living in six deprived areas.

The study is the first of its kind in England. There is little research investigating income and race inequalities in relation to urban green space provision and use. While a lot is already known about the relationships between income and ethnicity, and income and health, there have been very few studies that look at how green space, ethnicity or deprivation, and health are related. A handful of studies have looked at this within the context of urban areas. Few are large scale. This study fills a significant information gap.

*Community green* set out to investigate:

- 1 How significant the quality of urban green space is to the health and wellbeing of different socio-economic and ethnic communities living in six deprived urban areas of England
- 2 The impact of varying quality of urban green space on health and wellbeing in these areas.

The study included a survey of 523 people of white British (22 per cent of interviewees), Pakistani (22 per cent), Bangladeshi (17 per cent), black African and African-Caribbean (12 per cent) and Indian (11 per cent) origin who took part in 45-minute long face-to-face facilitated interviews in 2009.<sup>7</sup>

It focused on six areas in London, the West Midlands and Greater Manchester, areas chosen because of their high levels of deprivation and high percentage of black and minority ethnic residents, and because they contained green spaces of different levels of quality. However, we found lessons that are applicable to all neighbourhoods, regardless of their level of material deprivation or size of their minority ethnic population.

People were asked how important their local green spaces are in relation to other factors in making an area 'a good place to live'. The survey asked people about their health, their use of green space, the quality of their local green spaces and how improvements to their local spaces would affect their use, and levels of physical activity.

We found that people were very willing to talk about their local green spaces, especially those households with children.<sup>8</sup>

The survey was supported by literature review of over 150 publications and projects engaging people with their local green space.

**We found lessons that are applicable to all neighbourhoods, regardless of their level of deprivation or size of their minority ethnic population**

# Tackling inequality through local green space

*Community green* is unique in its scale and focus. It is based on over 500 interviews in six deprived and ethnically diverse areas and a literature review of over 150 publications and community projects.

The study shows that providing good-quality local green space is a hugely effective way to tackle inequality. People living in deprived urban areas view green space as a key service, alongside housing, health, education and policing – one of the essentials in making a neighbourhood liveable.

## The benefits

People greatly value local green spaces, from parks, pitches and recreation grounds to woodland and playgrounds. They appreciate the benefits in terms of relaxation and stress alleviation and the opportunity green space provides for exercise, social contact with friends and family and playing with children.

*Community green* suggests there is a virtuous circle: where people perceive green space quality to be good, they are also more satisfied with their neighbourhood and have better health and wellbeing. When people value their local green space and feel safe in it, they use it more and are more physically active. This relates strongly to ethnicity: for example, Indian interviewees were most likely to visit green spaces to exercise, and reported the highest perceived benefits if their local green spaces were improved.

The desire for more pleasant and attractive green spaces with more facilities was common to all interviewees regardless of their ethnicity. Almost half (46 per cent) said they would use their local green space more if it had better facilities.

Our review of published research shows that green space plays a role in easing racial tensions and bringing diverse groups together, for instance to play football or cricket, and promoting integration by providing space for organised and casual encounters with neighbours and different ethnic groups.

## The opportunities

The study revealed a number of barriers to better use of public green space by black and minority ethnic groups. Only half of Bangladeshi people said they feel safe using their local green space, compared with three quarters of white people.

The study exposes the extent to which green spaces on the doorstep are still underused because of their

poor quality. Less than 1 per cent of those living in social housing reported using the green spaces on their own estates and the biggest barriers were fear about personal safety, lack of facilities and poor quality.

Seventeen per cent of households in England are social tenants living in nearly four million homes, up to half of whom are likely to be aged under 16.<sup>9</sup> Social landlords are responsible for the large areas of green spaces that surround these homes. In some areas, particularly in London, this green space stock may be greater than the amount owned and managed by the local authority. While there are some examples of good practice, social landlords could make much more of this extraordinary asset and the benefits of exploiting it.

## Ways forward

The community is best placed to know the specific needs and priorities for their neighbourhood's green space, and local people can play a central role in driving the improvements they need. For example, there are many neighbourhood groups, such as residents' associations or friends of parks, which have taken an active role in the management or ownership of local green spaces, deciding how they are used and improved. Landowners, including local authorities and social housing providers, could do more to encourage this and to ensure community groups have the resources and skills to make it happen.

Landowners can take a more proactive and innovative approach to their green spaces more generally, working with local people to create safer and more attractive green spaces. In the areas that suffer from a shortage of green space, the creative use of temporarily vacant spaces, such as development sites, should be supported.

This matters for local authority performance. Everybody aspires to a better and safer local environment, and CABE research shows that if people are satisfied with their local parks and green spaces, they tend also to be satisfied with their council.<sup>10</sup>

7 Ethnicity was self-reported. People were asked to which ethnic group they belonged. 16 per cent of people were from other black and minority ethnic groups that included dual heritage people, Chinese and Turkish people. African-Caribbean and black African interviewees were combined into one group for analysis due to small study numbers.

8 68 per cent of people we asked agreed to take part in the survey.

9 8 per cent of social housing is managed by housing associations and 9 per cent by local authorities [cabeurl.com/c5](http://cabeurl.com/c5) and [cabeurl.com/cd](http://cabeurl.com/cd)

10 *Urban green nation: building the evidence base*, CABE, 2010 [cabeurl.com/cf](http://cabeurl.com/cf)

# Findings from the study

The four key findings are summarised here. The full research report, *Community green*, is available at: [www.cabe.org.uk/publications/community-green](http://www.cabe.org.uk/publications/community-green) with information on the survey and the literature on urban green space, deprivation, ethnicity, health and wellbeing.

## People's concerns about safety affect their use of local green space

### 1 Green space is a public resource with a proven track record in improving people's health, but too many local green spaces remain unused

The green space that mattered most to people in our study was the local park, which received a resounding vote of confidence despite varying levels of quality and use. It accounted for 90 per cent of the green spaces all people used.

The majority of interviewees (78 per cent) visited their nearest green space on foot, indicating that it is the local neighbourhood park that is of most significance. However, in locations with a higher-quality park, for instance with a Green Flag award, people did travel further.

Where people perceive green space quality to be good, they are more satisfied with their neighbourhood and are more likely to report better health.

Yet significant local green space resources remain unexploited. Public parks are far from being the only green spaces in towns and cities. Less than 1 per cent of those living in social housing (21 per cent of our interviewees) reported using the green spaces in the housing estate they live in. This may be due to concerns about safety, lack of access, or poor quality.

### What CAFE is doing

CAFE and the National Housing Federation have set out a practical action plan which identifies 10 priorities to improve the quality of the green spaces on social housing estates. The Neighbourhoods Green partnership, which aims to highlight the importance of green spaces for social housing residents, will work with social landlords to take these forward.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> *Decent homes need decent spaces: An action plan to improve open spaces in social housing areas*, CAFE Space and the National Housing Federation, 2010 [www.cabe.org.uk/social-landlords](http://www.cabe.org.uk/social-landlords)

<sup>12</sup> *Decent parks? Decent behaviour? The link between the quality of parks and user behaviour* CAFE space, 2005 [cabeurl.com/cg](http://cabeurl.com/cg)

## 2 People's concerns about safety affect their use of local green space. This concern varies by ethnicity

There is strong evidence that when people value their local green space and are likely to feel safe in it, they use it more and are more physically active. Concern about personal safety is the most important barrier to the use of green space, and perceptions of individual safety differed between ethnic groups. For instance, only 53 per cent of Bangladeshi people reported feeling safe using their local green space. This compares with 75 per cent of white interviewees.

Our survey data shows a relationship between the use of green space and perceptions of safety – those who use their green spaces less also tend to feel less safe in their area.

Barriers to using green spaces were related to ethnicity. They included feelings of insecurity due to the fear of personal attack or racism; exclusion due to the domination of a space by a particular group; and the presence of dogs (dog fouling or fear of dogs). Poor design such as high perimeter walls blocking views in and out, heavy vegetation and lack of lighting made a place feel unsafe, as well as inadequate maintenance and management leading to vandalism, litter, graffiti and drug paraphernalia.

**‘These park improvements have improved our quality of life. Where we were scared to walk in the park for fear of being robbed due to overgrown trees and hedges, we can now sit on comfortable seats and enjoy the open space and the flowers without being in fear’**

*Local resident, Groundwork East London park improvement project*

### What CABE is doing

CABE's *Decent parks? Decent behaviour?* describes spaces where a combination of good design, management and maintenance has transformed no-go areas back into popular assets used by the whole community. This can be a far more effective use of resources than, for instance, blanket use of CCTV or expensive security measures.<sup>12</sup>

## 3 Improving the quality of spaces will encourage more active use and exercise

Aspirations for good-quality green space were common to everyone we spoke to. Everybody wanted more facilities such as cafés, toilets, play and sports provision, and improved safety and more community events. Forty-six per cent of people said they would use their local green space more often if it had better facilities.

People mentioned the loss of well-used and valued facilities such as football and cricket pitches as reasons why they used space less. This was especially true of young people. Having nowhere to sit was also cited as a barrier to use.

Overall, if their local green space were made more pleasant and they began to use it more, 60 per cent of interviewees thought it would improve their overall physical health, 48 per cent thought it could improve their mental health, and 46 per cent thought it would make them feel better about their relationships with family and friends. Indian interviewees reported the highest perceived benefits of better local green space. While physical activity did not feature highly in people's current use patterns, in terms of future use (based upon an improved-quality green space), it featured much more highly. Fifty-two per cent of those asked said they would do more physical exercise if green spaces were improved.

Indian, Bangladeshi and Pakistani people were more likely than other ethnicities to visit urban green space for exercise. This suggests that improved green space use by these groups would also be more active use, and could make an especially important contribution to better health in black and minority ethnic groups.

**‘One thing that got us together was football. We grew up playing together, it brought us together. No type of racial tension here, it was simply because of that football pitch. Several years ago it got built on for flats. It's a real shame. Now there's lots of tension between whites and Asians’**

*Young Bengali male, focus group participant, London*



#### 4 Local people are best placed to know what they want from green space

Some groups visited green spaces more than others, and for different purposes, with physical activity (as referred to above) and social patterns of use generally more popular among black and minority ethnic interviewees. They were more likely to visit green space for social reasons than the white interviewees, with 'to eat and drink' and 'to visit for entertainment' scoring highly. In fact, in our survey, a person's ethnicity was the strongest indicator of the way they use their local green spaces.

The provision of green space services must take into account the preferences and needs of local people. 'One size fits all' green space does not work: only flexible spaces will meet the needs of a diverse community. The community should be given the chance to make spaces fit for purpose. The unusually high response to our survey demonstrated the interest people have in their local green space. Greater variety and flexibility in provision is required as well as consistently higher quality in all areas.

As the ethnic and age profile of the UK changes, green space managers need to understand the attitudes, needs and different reasons for green space use among local groups. They must work harder to involve their community in the management, planning and delivery of spaces, and existing ways of working may no longer be appropriate. Active marketing of sites; events and activities such as community fun days; guided walks; space for allotments; and considering alternative uses of specific areas will all bolster usage and result in a healthier and more satisfied community.

#### What CABE is doing

CABE's Spaceshaper is a practical toolkit that captures people's views about a space. Results can be compared between different groups and used to agree shared priorities for action before time and money is invested in improvements. Young people are often overlooked in community engagement. Spaceshaper 9-14 can be used in schools and youth clubs, enabling young people to get involved in improving their local parks, streets, playgrounds and other spaces.<sup>13</sup>

**'We don't mix with boys. We need somewhere to go to be away from our parents, somewhere just for girls'**

*Young Pakistani female, focus group participant, Greater Manchester*

**'I want colour – flowers, all different colours. I want to be able to walk out there, sit down ... enjoy the peace, quiet and enjoy the colour'**

*White male, focus group participant, London*

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13 [www.cabe.org.uk/public-space/spaceshaper](http://www.cabe.org.uk/public-space/spaceshaper)

# Conclusion

## Why these findings matter to everyone

Our study asked people how important access to green space is to a good living environment. The importance of this was compared to seven other factors tested, including suitability of housing and area safety and security.<sup>14</sup>

Access to green space contributed around 10 per cent towards what made an area a good place to live.

It also found that the need for access to green space is a basic and consistent factor – regardless of who you are or where you live.<sup>15</sup>

Overall, area safety and security were considered most important, contributing 16 per cent towards making an area ‘a good place to live’. This result varied in importance according to people’s ethnicity, with Bangladeshi, black African and African-Caribbean people rating safety as the second most important attribute after the design and construction of housing.

The quality of your local green space is of fundamental importance. But some people are missing out. Access to decent green space, alongside housing, health and education, is a basic requirement for a good quality of life. Public green spaces are a local resource for exercise and socialising, community events and education and offer respite from the pressures of urban living.

Locally led green space improvements foster community pride and create spaces people feel safe and confident using. If spaces provide what local people want, they will be better used and offer a far better return on investment.

The current inequality of provision matters, especially as the ethnic and age profile of the UK changes. Everyone wants to live in an area that has a pleasant and safe environment. The individual and community benefits are immeasurable.

Our research concludes it makes sense to focus on the people in the community who are worse off. Improving green space in urban areas benefits those that have most to gain.

**‘It’s high up, and there’s a lovely view of the city, a nice Italian café and a pergola. There’s a sense of being lost somewhere in time. There’s high grass, ponds, different people mixing and a family spirit. Children can play safely there; it’s always good for people-watching. I love it because it takes you out of the city. I walk and walk and I breathe. For me this park would have the top award’**

*White female, focus group participant, London*

14 The other factors were air quality, suitability of housing, area safety and security, noise pollution, shopping facilities, public transport and waste disposal.

15 Our survey used questions developed as part of a European-wide programme of research. The results were compared with data from six European regions. In this wider dataset access to green space also contributed 10 per cent, indicating this is a consistent attribute in making an area a good place to live regardless of individual differences such as level of income, ethnicity and country of residence [www.plurel.net/](http://www.plurel.net/)



**Improving green space in urban areas benefits those that have most to gain**

This study examines the impact of the quality of local green spaces on the health and wellbeing of people living in six deprived areas. It makes the connections between green space, ethnicity and inequality. It is the second of two pieces of research by CABI on why green space matters for health and wellbeing. This briefing will be of interest to policymakers and those working in local government, social housing and the voluntary and community sector.

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CABI Space is a specialist unit within CABI that aims to bring excellence to the design, management and maintenance of parks and public space in our towns and cities.

Published in 2010 by the  
Commission for Architecture  
and the Built Environment

Graphic design by  
Draught Associates

Printed by Blackmore on Revive  
recycled paper.

Cover images: Shoreditch Park,  
London © Jane Sebire and  
Concrete to coriander project,  
Birmingham © RHS/Jane Sebire

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