

Place and Wellbeing: Spaces Theme

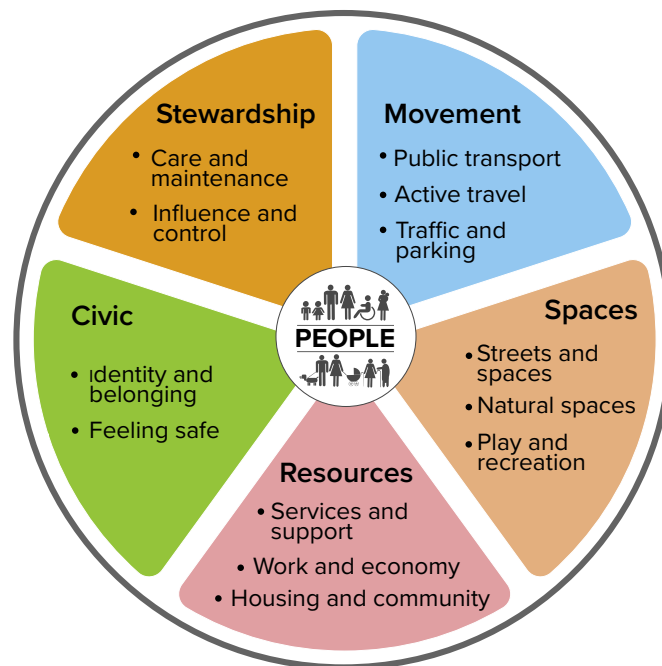
Evidence informed links from spaces to health



About this report

This briefing covers the Spaces theme within the Place and Wellbeing outcomes. It draws on evidence to set out the ways in which aspects of spaces – including streets and spaces, natural spaces and play and recreation – impact on health and health inequalities.

Place and Wellbeing Outcomes



The principles of equality, net-zero emissions and sustainability underpin all of these themes, and all themes should be embedded in policy and action

Purpose

This briefing is aimed at policymakers and decision-makers in the environment and spaces sector; planners and managers at all levels in local authorities and health boards; other community planning partners including health and social care partnerships; third sector organisations and community groups.



Place and wellbeing: spaces and public health

The places we live, work, play and age have an important role in determining our health and wellbeing and enabling communities to thrive.

Why spaces are important for health

Spaces can include civic spaces such as town squares, sports, play and recreation spaces such as football pitches and natural spaces such as parks. Some civic spaces or streets can include natural elements such as trees. The undertaking of physical activity and social interactions in high-quality spaces can lead to improved physical and mental health and wellbeing. Exposure to natural spaces can lead to a reduction in stress, which is beneficial for mental health and wellbeing. Natural spaces can also help with the reduction of harms from environmental hazards such as noise and air pollution (for example, from traffic). These spaces can contribute to climate change adaptation (the process of adjusting to the current and future effects of climate change to minimise harm) and mitigation (the effort to reduce or prevent greenhouse gas emissions).

Play, particularly outside in natural spaces, is essential for the healthy development of children including social, emotional and physical development.

High-quality spaces and streets can be defined as well-designed (including making them climate resilient), attractive, fit for purpose, well-connected and accessible, clean and well-maintained and safe for everyone to use. If they are not high-quality, they are unlikely to be used.

These spaces need to be accessible by either active travel (walking, wheeling and cycling) and/or public transport (see [Place and Wellbeing Outcomes briefing on Movement](#)).

Not everyone has access to high-quality streets and spaces with certain groups of the population – such as people living in deprived areas, disabled people and ethnic minority

people – facing greater barriers to access or use of these spaces. Some of the barriers for these groups include lack of available high-quality spaces; lack of awareness of the available spaces; physical barriers especially for people with mobility or sensory needs; safety concerns and exclusion due to perception that spaces are ‘not for them’ or rules barring some groups or uses (for example restrictions on children playing).

Place and Wellbeing Outcomes: Spaces theme

It is important that, to improve population and individual health, the outcomes within the Spaces theme are met in conjunction with the other themes of the Place and Wellbeing Outcomes. This should be done in a way that takes account of the needs of different populations and geographies to ensure they achieve equitable outcomes for all.

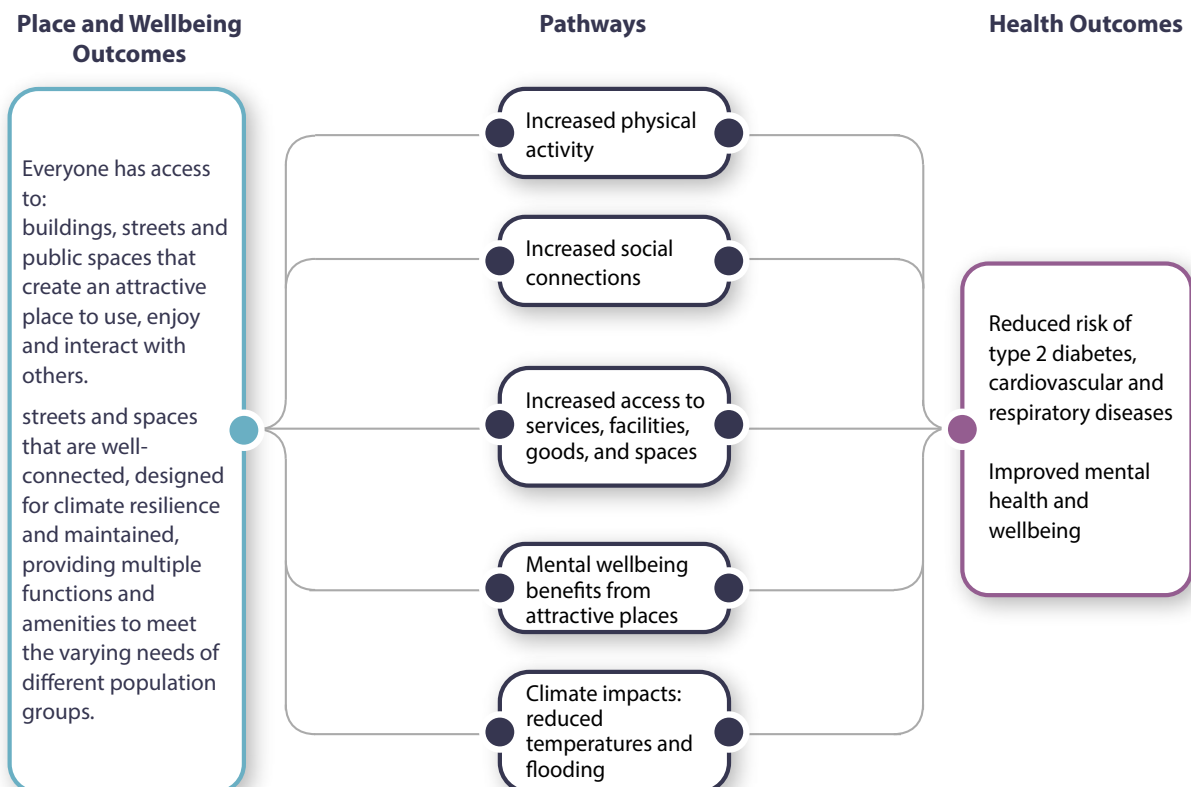
Theme	Outcome
Streets and spaces	<p>Everyone has access to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • buildings, streets and public spaces that create an attractive place to use, enjoy and interact with others. • streets and spaces that are well-connected, designed for climate resilience and maintained, providing multiple functions and amenities to meet the varying needs of different population groups.
Natural spaces	<p>Everyone can:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • access good-quality natural spaces that support biodiversity and are well-connected, safe, maintained, designed for climate resilience and provide multiple functions and amenities to meet the varying needs of different population groups. • be protected from environmental hazards including air/water/soil pollution or the risk of flooding. • access community food growing opportunities and prime quality agricultural land is protected.
Play and recreation	<p>Everyone can access a range of high quality, safe, well maintained, accessible places with opportunities for play and recreation to meet the varying needs of different population groups and the community itself.</p>



How can spaces help us achieve better and more equitable health for all?

The following section describes how each of the outcomes within the spaces theme can contribute to improved health and/or reduce health harms. It also demonstrates the potential impact on health inequalities if the needs of different populations are not considered when developing and delivering policy.

Streets and spaces



There is good evidence that streets and public spaces can bring benefits to physical and mental health and wellbeing. Streets that are connected can create walkable neighbourhoods. The use of streets, spaces and walkable neighbourhoods can play an important role in increasing the level of physical activity and can provide opportunities for social interactions. These factors can contribute to the reduced risk of type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular and respiratory diseases and improved mental health and wellbeing.

Streets and spaces which can allow people to find their way without difficulty will allow people to move around easily and safely and to access facilities and services. Attractive, walkable, well-connected streets with more people on them improve passive surveillance such as 'eyes on the street' and so can feel safer for some population groups.

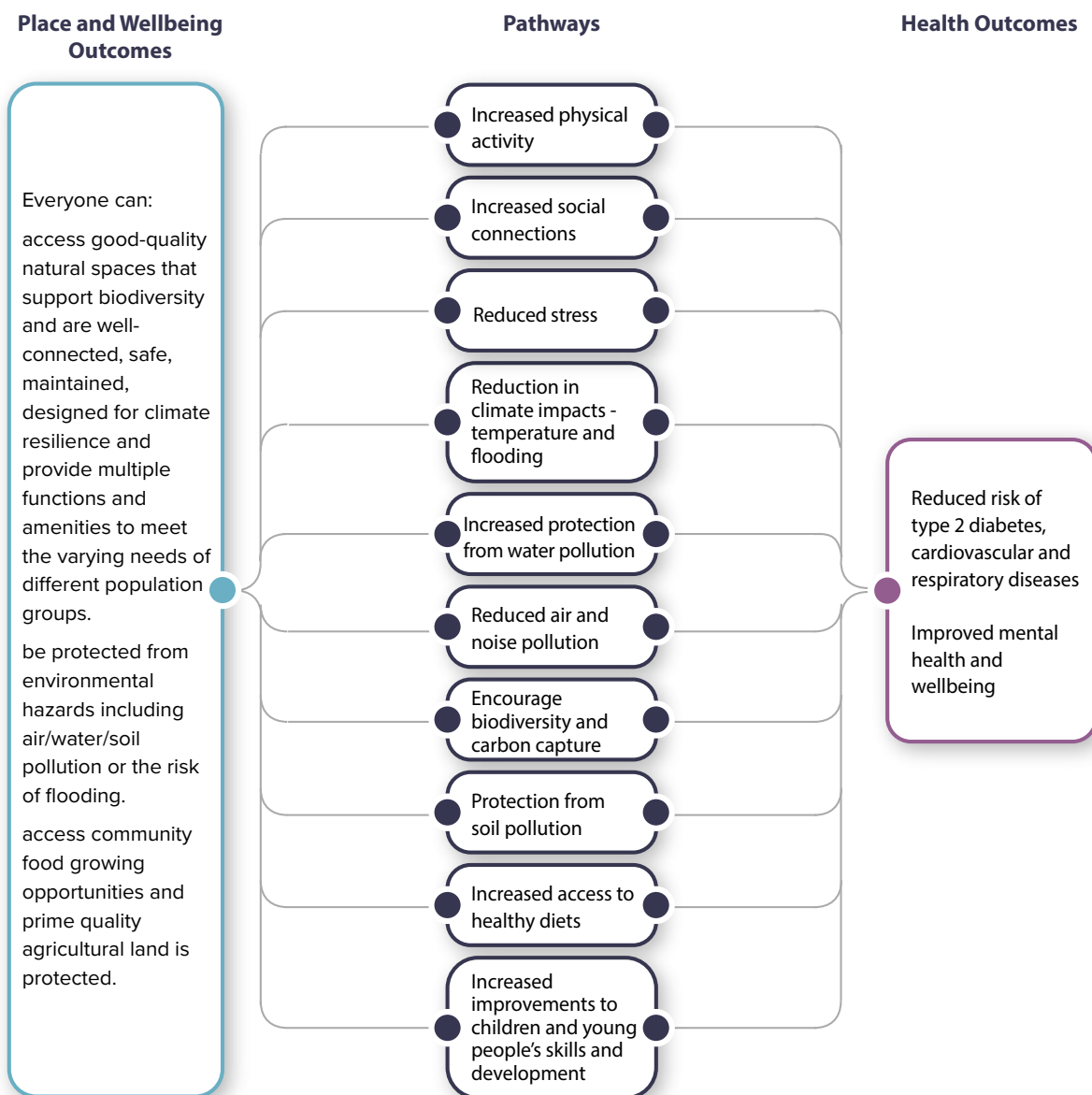
Pedestrians, wheelers and cyclists can be at risk of injury, for example from falls, particularly if streets and pavements are uneven or poorly maintained or shared spaces (shared between pedestrians, wheelers, cyclists and vehicles) are badly designed so do not allow for different groups to use these spaces safely. Inadequate or poor public spaces are likely to be used less, which can also lead to reduced social interactions.

The quality of public spaces is linked to people's perceptions of the attractiveness of an area and could influence how people use their local area or environment including where they shop. There is evidence that mental wellbeing and quality of life is higher if the residents perceive their neighbourhood, including the buildings, as attractive.

Inequalities in streets and spaces

- It has been suggested that more deprived areas may lack adequate provision of good-quality public spaces.

Natural spaces



Natural spaces/environments include greenspaces, such as gardens (public and private), parks and woodlands, fields, greenspace alongside paths and roads, and tree-lined streets. It can also include blue spaces such as streams, canals, rivers and the coastline.

The main mechanisms through which natural spaces are believed to impact on health is by increased recreation and physical activity, improved social connectedness and reduced stress. Natural spaces can help maintain a healthy immune system and can provide mental health benefits such as lessening the impact of stress. These spaces can encourage social interactions and a sense of community and belonging, which are beneficial for health and wellbeing.

If children and young people spend time, including learning, in green and natural spaces, for example in school settings, it can lead to improvements in their skills and development (see also next section in this briefing on play and recreation).

Natural spaces can help with environmental pollutants such as improving air and noise quality and can be good for climate change adaptation, for example reducing risks from adverse weather events such as flooding and heatwaves. There is evidence that trees and other green infrastructure can provide environmental cooling, or cooling effect and shade, when there are extreme heat waves and natural spaces can soak up rain to help alleviate the risk of flooding. Natural spaces and nature can help with climate mitigation such as the capturing and storage of carbon from the atmosphere.

There is evidence which suggests that natural spaces can encourage biodiversity and wildlife. A loss of biodiversity could negatively impact on health. This is because biodiversity supports ecosystem¹ functions for example the provisioning of essential items such as fresh water and food, which are essential for human health and wellbeing.

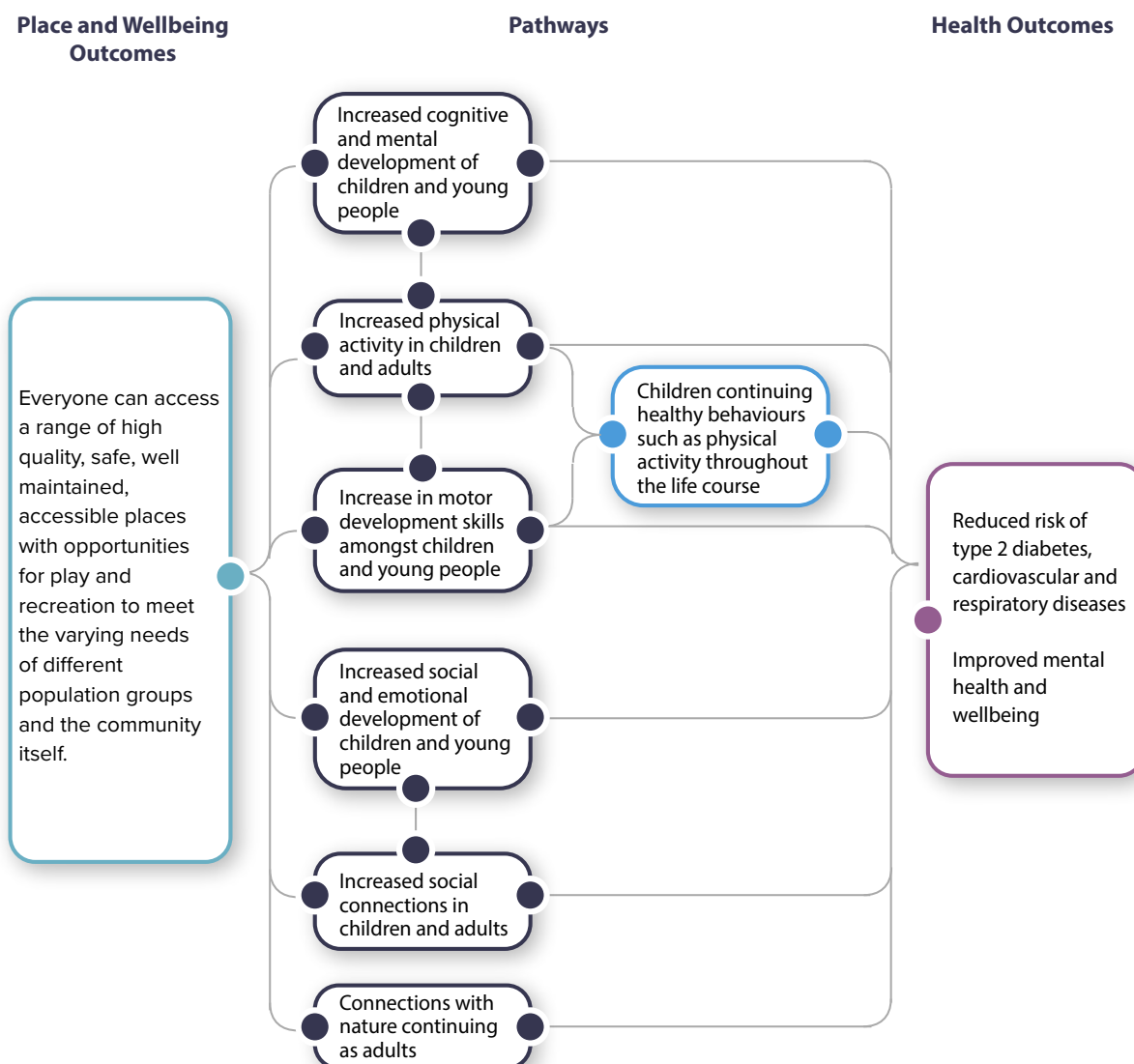
There is some evidence to suggest that participating in community growing can lead to health benefits such as improved mental health and wellbeing, food security and potentially increasing physical activity, and improving diet, (for example an increase in the consumption of fruit and vegetables).

Inequalities in natural spaces

- People on a low income and/or living in deprived areas may have less availability and/or reduced access to quality greenspaces.
- The use of greenspaces varies between population groups, with people from the most deprived areas, people with long-term health conditions or disabilities and people from ethnic minority groups less likely to visit a natural space or visit less frequently.
- The benefits of high-quality green or natural space on health might be more significant for certain groups within the population such as children, older people, people on low incomes and those living in deprived areas.
- There is evidence to suggest that greenspaces may have the potential to help with reducing health inequalities. This is because some studies have found that 'socioeconomic related inequalities in health tend to be lower in greener communities' (Public Health England – see 'other sources of information' section in this briefing).

¹ 'Ecosystems are the dynamic complexes of plant, animal and microorganism communities and their non-living environment interacting as a functional unit.' (World Health Organization – see 'other sources of information' section in this briefing)

Play and recreation



Engaging in play and recreation is beneficial for the health of adults and children through the encouragement of physical activity and social interactions.

There is evidence that suggests play can increase physical activity levels especially if it is 'active play' (involves physical movement and is usually unplanned, self-directed and fun). If children are physically active when they are young, they are more likely to adopt these healthy behaviours or lifestyles as they grow up.

Play is also important to the cognitive, physical, social and emotional development and wellbeing of children and young people. For example, young children can develop language skills, mathematical understanding or problem solving, social skills and perceptual abilities through play. Children can create friendships and social relationships through play.

There is evidence that outdoor play or activities - particularly in natural/greenspaces - can be associated with the appropriate understanding and management of risk among children

and motor development skills such as strength, balance and coordination in children and young people. Children playing in outdoor environments can have improved concentration, be more confident and are more likely to be involved in their local communities compared to children who play outside less often. Outdoor play/activities in children have been linked to greater environmental awareness and connections with nature as adults.

If play and recreation spaces are perceived to be of poor design or quality and unsafe this can lead to children and young people not using these spaces. Also restrictions on children's play can prevent them from benefiting from outdoor play.

Inequalities associated with play and recreation

- There is evidence to suggest that more deprived areas are less likely to have good-quality spaces for children to play or have unsafe recreation areas compared to less deprived areas.
- There are barriers to use of play and recreation facilities due to disabilities, being from an ethnic minority group and/or personal safety concerns for girls, women and minority groups.
- Some populations may face barriers due to perception that some facilities are not 'for them'.



Conclusion

The evidence in this briefing demonstrates that the influence of spaces on health and health inequalities is complex and wide ranging. This briefing was based on evidence from a report, [Evidence behind Place Standard Tool and Place and Wellbeing Outcomes](#), where there were limitations, for example the evidence could sometimes only show links between the outcomes and health rather than showing that the outcomes definitively caused the health effect.

The evidence shows that good quality, accessible spaces, in particular natural spaces, can positively impact on people's health, but differences in population needs must be considered so that health inequalities are not exacerbated.

It is recommended that a [Place and Wellbeing Assessment](#) or scoping [Health Impact Assessment](#) is carried out as part of the development of national or local policies on streets or spaces, to ensure that these needs are identified, and actions are put in place to alleviate any negative effect.

Other sources of information

The evidence detailed in this Place and Wellbeing: Spaces Theme briefing document is from the following sources:

- Public Health Scotland. [Evidence behind Place Standard Tool and Place and Wellbeing Outcomes](#). Edinburgh: Public Health Scotland; 2022.
- Public Health Scotland. [COVID-19 and greenspace use Survey findings summary](#). Edinburgh: Public Health Scotland; 2022.
- Public Health England. [Improving access to greenspace. A new review for 2020](#). London: Public Health England; 2020.
- World Health Organization. [Nature, Biodiversity and Health: An Overview of Interconnections](#). Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe; 2021.
- Hume C, Grieger JA, Kalamkarian A, D'Onise K, and Smithers LG. Community gardens and their effects on diet, health, psychosocial and community outcomes: a systematic review. *BMC Public Health* 2022 22: 1247.
- House of Commons Library. Research Briefing Paper No CBP 9969 [Climate change adaptation and resilience in the UK](#). London: House of Commons Library; 2025.

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