Local greenspaces in everyday life: Visits, quality, and barriers across different groups

The Summary Report

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Summary of Natural England Commissioned Report NECR656

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NATURAL ENGLAND

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Natural England is here to secure a healthy natural environment for people to enjoy, where wildlife is protected and England's traditional landscapes are safeguarded for future generations.

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Foreword

Natural England's (hereafter, "NE") goals include promoting people's access to green and natural spaces as well as contributing to society's wellbeing, enjoyment and prosperity. In 2023, NE's sponsor, Defra, published the Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP), the most recent iteration of the 25 Year Environment Plan (25 YEP). Under the apex goal of the EIP, improving nature, there are 10 sub-goals. The 10th sub-goal of the EIP is to 'enhance beauty, heritage, and engagement with the natural environment'. As part of this, the government committed to 'work across government to fulfil a new and ambitious commitment that everyone should live within 15 minutes' walk of a green or blue space.'

Since the publication of the EIP, Defra has worked with Other Government Departments and Arms-Length Bodies to develop and deliver this commitment in a way that delivers meaningful improvements to the green and blue space people have available within 15 minutes of their front door. Defra has commissioned various analytical pieces to understand what access people in England have within 15 minutes of their home.

The main work in this area to date, has used a network model calculating walking distance to greenspace. An official statistic in development was published on 1st August 2024.

The Adult's People and Nature Survey

Natural England ran the Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment (MENE) survey across England from 2009 to 2019. In 2020 the People and Nature Survey (PANS) was created to substitute MENE.

PANS includes a survey specifically for adults (A-PaNS) and another for children (C-PaNS). The A-PaNS survey started running in April 2020 and, at the time of writing, monthly collection of data continues. The A-PaNS collects 2,000-2,100 responses per month, yielding around 25,000 responses a year. Note that the sample is not longitudinal, meaning, respondents are different every month. The A-PaNS includes a total of six question modules, each focusing on different aspects of people's engagement with nature. The raw data can be accessed on UK data service.

Natural England commission a range of reports from external contractors to provide evidence and advice to assist us in delivering our duties. The views in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of Natural England.

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Key findings

While most people have a greenspace nearby (73% within a 15-minute walk), over a quarter of the population does not (27% more than a 15-minute walk away). Greenspaces are also unequally distributed across the population, creating disparities between socio-demographic groups. These disparities highlight the structural barriers underpinning differences in greenspace engagement, which disproportionally affect ethnic minority groups and low-income communities. For example, 38% of adults in the least deprived areas live within a five-minute walk of a greenspace, compared to just 26% in the most deprived.

Proximity was a key driver of frequent greenspace use: those living more than 15 minutes away had 60% lower odds of being frequent users. However, proximity is not sufficient on its own to guarantee engagement. Perceived high-quality was also crucial to ensuring spaces were well-used. Those with a negative view of their local greenspaces had 60% lower odds than those with the most positive perceptions to be frequent visitors. Taking the quantitative and qualitative findings together, perceived high-quality encompassed a wide range of physical and social aspects, including safety, accessibility, adequate transport infrastructure, and provision of basic amenities. Notably, a small group of users (6%) continued to visit greenspaces frequently despite perceiving them as low quality—likely out of necessity rather than preference.

While proximity and perceived quality were the strongest predictors of regular greenspace use, individuals also cited personal factors that limited their time spent outdoors. These included personal preference for other recreational activities and family and work commitments. While these personal constraints may seem beyond the reach of policymakers, structural factors—such as the availability of inviting, well-maintained spaces—can shape perceptions of greenspaces and influence whether people view them as appealing destinations in the first place.

The research also highlighted the dual role that greenspaces play. Local greenspaces support everyday activities such as walking and relaxation, while larger, more distant greenspaces facilitate longer, planned visits with a wider variety of recreational opportunities. For example, while only 6% of visits to greenspaces within 1km of home involved picnicking or eating out, this rose to 20% for visits to spaces further away.

The research highlighted three main considerations for ongoing work to improve greenspace access and use.

- Consider the unequal distribution of physical greenspaces in future investment decisions.
- Recognise the central importance of perceived greenspace quality in policies and planning.

- Tailor interventions to the different roles that local and destination greenspaces play in people's lives.

Introduction

As evidenced in the Government's 25 Year Environment Plan (25YEP), there are wide-ranging benefits to spending time in nature, including improving mental and physical health and wellbeing, combatting loneliness, and strengthening communities. Despite these known benefits, access to, and engagement with, the natural environment among the population is not equal. Understanding these disparities is essential for informing policy and ensuring that greenspaces fulfil their potential as an accessible and equitable public good.

Policy context

In the 25YEP, the Government committed to 'enhance beauty, heritage and engagement with the natural environment'. As part of the Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP), the most recent iteration of the 25YEP, the government further committed to 'work across government to fulfil a new and ambitious commitment that everyone should live within 15 minutes' walk of a green or blue space.'

The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) works with government departments and arm's length bodies, such as Natural England, to develop and implement policies aimed at supporting these aims. Natural England is a non-departmental public body which has a responsibility to promote access to and use of outdoor green and natural spaces of all types. Natural England's own 2020-2025 strategy, *Building Partnerships for Nature's Recovery*, includes specific five-year aims around promoting access to nature.

In this context, Natural England commissioned The National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) to provide a comprehensive assessment of how people in England access, use, and perceive greenspaces.

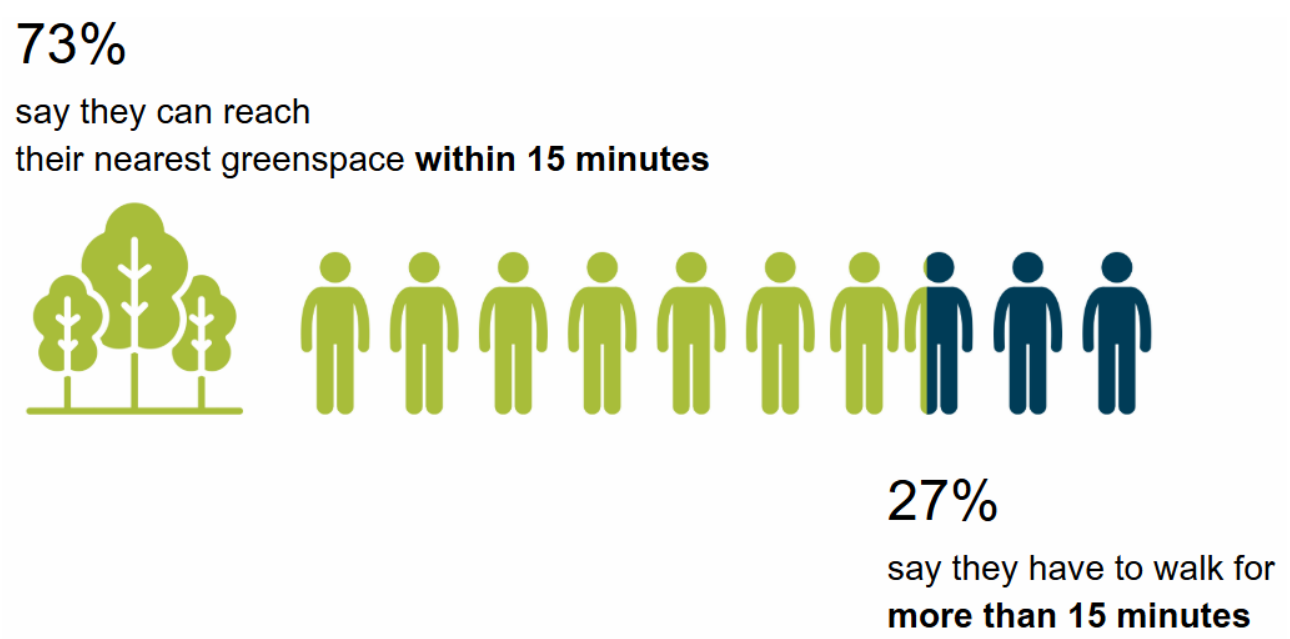
About the findings

The study draws on nationally representative data from Natural England's Adults' People and Nature Survey (APaNS) and qualitative data from focus groups with the general public to provide a better understanding of the barriers and enablers to greenspace access and use. The findings will contribute to ongoing efforts to improve the provision and quality of these spaces. The remainder of this report provides further insights into how greenspace access varies across the population, the ways people engage with these spaces, the factors influencing frequency of use, and the broader implications for policy and planning.

Who has access to nearby greenspaces and who doesn't?

Most people in England report having a greenspace within walking distance of their home. This includes countryside, coastal, and urban greenspaces, but excludes private gardens. Almost three quarters (73%) say they can reach their nearest greenspace within a 15-minute walk, while nearly a third (32%) live within a five-minute walk. A substantial proportion, however, still lack easy access to green spaces. Over a quarter (27%), say they have to walk for more than 15 minutes to reach their nearest green space (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Reported access to nearby greenspace



Access is also not equally distributed across the population, with certain demographic groups facing worse access than others. Ethnicity strongly influenced greenspace proximity, with White adults (36%) much more likely to say they live within a five-minute walk of a greenspace than Black or Black British (19%) or Asian or Asian British (23%) adults. Socioeconomic status was also a key predictor of access. Almost two fifths (38%) of adults in the least deprived areas live within a five-minute walk of a greenspace, compared to just 26% in the most deprived.

There was also a clear disparity according to health status, with over a third (36%) of people with health conditions that significantly affected their day-to-day activities living more than a 15-minute walk from their nearest greenspace. This fell to 25% for those with no health conditions. This finding indicates that disabled people may face compounding barriers to access: they live further away from greenspaces and also find it more difficult to travel to these spaces because of their condition or impairment.

Notably, those in full-time work were less likely to live near greenspace than those who were retired or self-employed. Just under a third (31%) of full-time employees said they had a greenspace no more than a five-minute walk away, but this rose to 40% for retirees and 41% for self-employed individuals. These latter two groups may benefit from greater flexibility in where they live, while employees' choices are likely constrained by where jobs are located.

Interestingly, when comparing self-reported greenspace access to modelled estimates—where map data is used to calculate the shortest walkable route to the nearest greenspace—people's perceptions generally align with the modelled distances. One exception is access amongst rural residents. While some modelling approaches suggest that rural households have lower access to greenspaces compared to urban areas (See Access to greenspace in England - GOV.UK), rural residents themselves report better access. Half (50%) of rural respondents say they live within a five-minute walk of a greenspace, compared to just 31% of those in urban areas. This discrepancy may stem from differences in how greenspaces are defined in mapping models, which often exclude features such as public rights-of-way through private land, leading to an underestimation of accessible green spaces in rural areas.

How do people use greenspaces?

Greenspaces offer a wide range of benefits, but how people use them varies depending on factors including proximity, setting, and individual preferences. Understanding these patterns is essential for ensuring that greenspace planning and investment reflect real-world behaviours.

Walking is by far the dominant activity in greenspaces, far surpassing all other forms of engagement. Across most greenspace types, more than 60% of people's most recent (within the last two weeks) visits to a greenspace involved walking. The only exceptions were visits to allotments and community gardens, and hill, mountain, and moorland spaces. In focus groups, individuals described walking for a range of reasons; for exercise, relaxation, or as part of their daily routines—for example, dog walking.

Local compared to destination greenspaces

There was a clear link between the distance people travelled to a greenspace and the types of activities they engaged in during their visits. While there was little difference in activities between very close (up to 300 meters) and close spaces (301 meters to 1 km), substantial differences emerged between spaces close to home (within 1 km) and those farther away (beyond 1 km).

Nearby greenspaces were more likely to be used for casual, everyday activities (particularly walking), while more distant greenspaces served as destinations for planned outings and a greater variety of activities. For example, while only 6% of visits to greenspaces within 1km of home involved picnicking or eating out, this figure rose to 20% for visits to spaces more than 1km away.

People were also more likely to report having visited a further-away greenspace in the last two weeks, than spaces closer to home. While this finding appears to contradict findings elsewhere in this report that individuals use their closest space most frequently, it suggests visits to further away greenspaces (requiring more planning and effort) were more memorable.

In line with this, over two fifths (41%) of visits to further-away spaces (over 1km) were considered exceptional, compared to only 23% of visits to spaces less than 1km away. This division suggests that greenspaces serve different roles in people's daily lives, underscoring the need for planning and investment strategies that account for these variations in use and purpose.

How activities vary depending on type and features of the space

While walking dominates visits across all greenspace types, certain environments supported more specialised activities. Wildlife watching, for example, was strongly associated with nature reserves (16% of visitors engaged in this activity, compared to the 4-10% seen in other spaces).

Other spaces stood out for social, cultural, or recreational activities. For instance, country parks and historic properties were often visited for attractions (11%), while beaches and coastal areas are more popular for picnicking and eating out (7%). Similarly urban spaces stood out for family-orientated activities. Around 9% of visits to these spaces involved playing with children, a higher proportion than in other greenspace types.

Beyond the type of space, the available amenities also influenced the activities people engaged in. People who perceived their greenspace as having adequate facilities were more likely to engage in a wider range of activities during their visit. In focus groups, individuals explained that having access to amenities such as toilets and seating areas encouraged them to spend longer in the spaces and facilitated activities such as days out and children's parties.

How do people perceive their local greenspaces?

As well as exploring access to local greenspaces, the research examined people's perceptions of these spaces and the extent to which they were seen as 'high-quality'. The People and Nature Survey's definition of a 'high-quality' space is one that functions well and meets people's needs.

Four distinct perception-based groups

Based on the answers to the following six questions about greenspace perception, people were categorised into four quality perception groups that encompassed distinct ways of answering the question set.

The question set was asked in this way:

"My local green spaces are:

1. Good places for mental health and wellbeing
2. Of a high enough standard to want to spend time in
3. Good places for children to play
4. Places that encourage physical health and exercise
5. Good places to meet other people, and
6. Provide good opportunities to see nature"

Generally, perceptions fell on a continuum from high to low perceived quality. Notably, views on different aspects of greenspace quality tended to align, that is, spaces perceived as high quality in one aspect were often seen to excel across multiple dimensions.

Figure 2: Quality-perception groups within the populations

The population could therefore be grouped into four distinct categories. At one end of the spectrum, the 'best quality' group (28%) were overwhelmingly positive about their local areas (Figure 2). This was followed by the 'good quality' group (46%), who were generally positive but less enthusiastic than the previous category. A fifth (20%) of the population—the 'worse quality' group—had more mixed perceptions, with many feeling neutral about their spaces. Finally, the 'worst quality' category (6%) was the smallest but most dissatisfied group. They rated their spaces poorly against most of the quality aspects.

In focus groups, perceptions of quality were influenced by the type of greenspace and how individuals preferred to use it. People had different expectations, for example, of what urban parks should offer compared to rural spaces. There were, however, common factors associated with a space being 'high-quality': a space feels safe to visit; a space is visually appealing and well maintained; a space caters to the needs of different visitors; a space is easily accessible; and a space is environmentally friendly.

'High-quality' perceptions were therefore closely tied to the features of the space itself, rather than its suitability for a specific activity or purpose and may explain why people tended to rate their spaces similarly across the six dimensions set out above.

Variations in quality perception by demographic characteristics, proximity and frequency of use

Variations in quality perceptions across demographic groups tended to mirror disparities in access to greenspaces. White adults, those in less deprived areas, non-disabled and older people were more likely to perceive their nearby greenspaces as high-quality. The reverse was true for those from minority ethnic backgrounds, in more deprived areas, disabled and younger people. Somewhat surprisingly, those in rural areas were only slightly more likely than urban dwellers to live in an area with perceived high-quality greenspace.

Proximity to green and natural spaces was also linked to perceived quality, with those living closer to greenspaces more likely to view their spaces positively. Nevertheless, a large proportion of individuals living more than 15 minutes away also reported high satisfaction with the quality of their local greenspaces, with over half (69%) being in the 'best quality' and 'good quality' groups.

Perceived quality of greenspaces was strongly linked to how often people used them. Those who rated their local greenspaces more positively tended to visit them more frequently. More than half (55%) of individuals in the ‘best quality’ group reported visiting green and natural spaces more than twice a week, compared to just 30% of those in the ‘worse quality’ category. A similar pattern was seen in relation to personal preference, with 78% of those who prioritised spending time in nature considering their local spaces to be at least ‘good quality’. These findings indicate a reciprocal relationship between living near quality greenspaces and appreciation for and engagement with nature.

Notably however, participants in the ‘worst quality’ group were frequent visitors despite dissatisfaction with their quality. This indicates that a segment of the population was dependent on low-quality local spaces and had no better alternatives nearby.

What are the main factors that influence greenspace use?

The research also sought to better understand the main enablers and barriers to greenspace use, including the relative importance of proximity compared to perceived quality.

Proximity

Proximity was a key driver of greenspace use. Nearly four out of five people (78%) reported that their nearest green or natural space is the one they visit most often. Further, those living more than 15 minutes away from their nearest greenspace had 60% lower odds of visiting any greenspace more than twice per week than those with spaces within a 5-minute walk from their homes (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Relationship between proximity and frequency of use

Importantly, the obstacles to using greenspaces that people reported varied depending on how close they lived to their nearest greenspace. Those who lived further from greenspaces were more likely to report structural barriers, such as insufficient facilities, costs or safety concerns. Conversely, those with a greenspace within a five-minute walk were more likely to cite personal barriers and seasonal factors, such as being too busy or bad weather. Among infrequent users specifically, those with close-by spaces were more likely not to face any barriers at all (37% of those living within a five-minute walk compared to 26% of those with their nearest greenspace more than 15 minutes away).

In focus groups convenience was highlighted as a key consideration in greenspace use, explaining the preference for closer by spaces. Such visits could fit in around work and other commitments. However, participants also emphasised the importance of the size and location of spaces. At times, individuals preferred to travel further to spaces that were larger (offering greater scope for activities) or in more rural settings (offering easier connection to nature).

Quality

Proximity alone, however, does not determine greenspace engagement. Perceived greenspace quality also plays a role. Generally, those who perceived their spaces as higher quality were also more likely to visit often: those in the ‘worse quality’ group had 60% lower odds of frequently using their nearby spaces than those in the ‘best quality’ group. Put simply, having a greenspace within easy walking distance is not enough - maintaining and enhancing the quality of these spaces is equally crucial to ensuring they are well-used.

In contrast to the general trend however, the small group of people in the ‘worst quality’ group (6% of the population) were also frequent users despite holding generally negative perceptions of their local greenspaces. The qualitative findings indicate that for some individuals, particularly those living in apartments in urban areas, this frequent use may be driven by necessity rather than preference. They rely on these spaces for exercise or dog walking, even if they perceive them as of a poor standard.

As discussed in the previous section, the factors that contribute to a space being seen as ‘high-quality’ are wide-ranging. The importance of quality as a factor in greenspace use therefore highlights the relevance of other aspects to people’s behaviour and decision-making, including

- the perceived safety of spaces, both from trips and falls, and anti-social behaviour of other users,
- the cleanliness and visual appeal of spaces,
- how easy spaces are to reach on foot, by car or public transport and to navigate once there, and
- the provision of basic amenities, especially clean and safe toilets.

Individual, structural and seasonal aspects

Beyond proximity and perceived quality, there were a range of other individual, structural and environmental aspects that played a significant role in shaping how often people visited greenspaces.

Certain demographic groups were more likely to be frequent users than others. People in full- or part-time employment, for example, were less likely to use greenspaces often compared to the self-employed or retired. The same pattern applied to older compared to younger people, with those aged over 25 being less likely to be frequent users than those aged 16 to 24. These differences may reflect the impact of time constraints on individuals’ greenspace use: 27% cited being too busy with responsibilities at home and 26% at work as obstacles to spending time outdoors.

Health status and ethnicity further shaped engagement patterns. Those who were not working due to a long-term sickness or disability were less likely to be frequent users of greenspaces compared to employed people, while White adults were more likely to visit

greenspaces regularly than those from Asian or Asian British or "Other" ethnic backgrounds. These differences likely highlight the persistent influence of structural barriers and inequalities on greenspace use, including the availability of accessible facilities and transport infrastructure, and experiences of discrimination in these spaces.

The most commonly reported barrier to spending more time outdoors was bad weather (43%). Despite this, use of greenspaces remained remarkably consistent—and quite high—across seasons. Visits peaked in August, with 77% having visited a greenspace in the last two weeks. In contrast, visits were lowest in December, with 68% reporting recent visits. In focus groups, participants emphasised the lack of day light hours in winter as a particular barrier to use. However, summer also presented obstacles to more frequent use, including increased anti-social behaviour and lack of shade from the sun.

Implications: Improving access to and encouraging use of greenspaces

Natural England commissioned this research to support ongoing efforts to enhance public engagement with the natural environment. It was also intended to inform policies to reduce inequality and deprivation, through a better understanding of the benefits and barriers to greenspace use. The findings highlight three main considerations for Natural England in taking forward this work:

- **Unequal distribution of physical greenspaces.** A key consideration for future investment decisions is the disparity in access to nearby greenspaces between communities in England. Unsurprisingly, proximity to greenspace is a key driver for engagement with the natural environment, yet households in more deprived areas, disabled people and ethnic minority groups on average must travel further to access these resources. This research highlighted the value of greenspaces as places for rest and relaxation, exercise and time spent with family. Improving access therefore has wider implications for the health and wellbeing of these groups.
- **The importance of quality in greenspace planning.** To ensure engagement, greenspaces needed to be not only available, but also inviting and pleasant to spend time in. While quality perceptions varied somewhat depending on the type of spaces and personal preference, there were a number of factors that consistently shaped individuals' views of these spaces. These included how safe a space felt, and whether it was easily accessible and well-maintained. Given their potential to substantially influence people's willingness to use these spaces, consideration should be given to how best to embed these factors in location, layout and design decisions.
- **Different spaces serve different functions.** Individuals used local and destination greenspaces for very different activities. While nearby spaces tended to be used for frequent, habitual activities, further away greenspaces offered opportunities for planned visits, family events and days out. The distinct role that destination greenspaces play in people's lives highlights the importance of measures tailored to ensuring these spaces too can be enjoyed by everyone. Such measures might include improved road layouts and enhanced public transport links to improve access, as well as campaigns to improve public awareness about the types of activities and amenities they offer.

About the data

The study draws on data from Natural England's Adults' People and Nature Survey (APaNS), a nationally representative dataset that captures self-reported information on greenspace access, use, and perceptions. With approximately 25,000 respondents per year, the survey provides a robust foundation for understanding patterns and disparities across different demographic groups.

The study employed a combination of descriptive analyses and segmentation techniques (Latent Class Analysis) to identify distinct groups based on their perceptions of greenspace quality. It also used statistical modelling to determine the key factors that influence greenspace use. These analytical approaches allowed for a nuanced understanding of the complex relationship between greenspace access, use, and perceived quality. To complement these quantitative insights, the study also included qualitative research with users and non-users of local greenspaces. Three online focus groups were carried out to provide a deeper, more contextualised understanding of the structural barriers and behavioural drivers that influence individuals' greenspace engagement.

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