

Unlocking the power of green spaces in Northern Towns and Cities

A summary of research findings and recommendations

September 2023



This work was conducted on behalf of:



Contents

1. Introduction.....	1
2. Key findings from the public and stakeholders.....	2
3. Unlocking the power of urban green spaces.....	6
4. Background and methodology.....	11
4.1 Background	11
4.2 Methodology overview	12
4.3 Sample overview.....	12
5. The public view	14
6. Stakeholders' view.....	22
7. Appendix.....	26

1. Introduction

In England, 82.9% of the population currently live in urban areas, and this share is growing.¹ However, geospatial mapping indicates that publicly accessible green spaces in urban areas are not evenly distributed across England, with fewer available to residents in the North of the country.²

Urban green spaces present a fantastic opportunity to deliver on a wide variety of key objectives for towns and cities in the North. This is a role they have played since early urbanisation, and it is why so many early Northern industrial philanthropists subscribed and gave land to the establishment of much-loved historic parks. Parks such as Princes Park in Liverpool, Birkenhead Park, Peel Park in Salford and Peoples Park in Halifax were some of the earliest examples of urban green spaces being valued for their health and recreational benefits for city-dwellers.

With towns and cities grappling with challenges such as climate change, air pollution, decline of retail, mental health crises and nature loss, urban green spaces represent a key opportunity for leaders to protect and future-proof their towns and cities, while also enhancing their prosperity and liveability. Urban woodlands, rivers, wetlands and coastal habitats can all play a significant role in this, as identified in the 'sister' report by Eftic 'Economic Valuation of the North's Urban Green Spaces' (2023).

This report sets out findings and recommendations from research conducted by Thinks Insight & Strategy with stakeholders and members of the public to explore how the potential of urban green spaces can be unlocked in the North. More detail on the insights derived from this research, including specific feedback on various ideas tested, can be found in the full report located on the Nature North website www.naturenorth.org.uk.

Throughout this report, when we refer to 'urban green spaces' we mean the many types of publicly accessible green and blue spaces, or opportunities to access nature, in towns and cities. This includes for example, parks, woodlands, rivers, canals, street trees, pocket parks, nature reserves, grassy verges, coast, and allotments.



¹ Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs / Government Statistical Service (UK Government) (March 2023) Statistical Digest of Rural England: 1. Population.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/population-statistics-for-rural-england> Accessed 19/09/2023.

² Robinson, JM, Mavoa, S, Robinson, K, Brindley, P (2022) Urban centre green metrics in Great Britain: A geospatial and socioecological study. PLoS ONE 17(11). <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0276962>

2. Key findings from the public and stakeholders

Alongside exploring public and stakeholder background views and experiences of green spaces in the North, this project seeks to shed light on the dynamics that are preventing green spaces from playing their full potential at the moment, and to identify the insights that could help unlock the power of green spaces in the future.

Background views & experiences of green space

The potential for improved, accessible green spaces to deliver significant benefits for people, communities and nature in towns and cities is recognised by stakeholders and members of the public across the North of England. For this study, the North is defined as Yorkshire and Humberside, the North West, and the North East, the area shaded in red in the map opposite.



While large sections of the public are broadly satisfied with the green space near their homes, some groups among the public in the North – in particular less affluent groups and members of minoritized ethnic groups - are more likely than others to report lower access and lower satisfaction with their green space.

Both the public and stakeholders recognise that access to high quality green space is not evenly spread across the North and support the idea of improving this in the future.

1. The benefits of high quality local green space are recognised by members of the public in urban areas of the North

- Green spaces are understood, by stakeholders and public alike, to deliver significant benefits to local communities, including creating valued spaces for exercise, socialising and community engagement.
- Two thirds (68%) of the urban public of the North report they use or spend time in the green spaces within 15 minutes of their home at least once a week or more.³

³ Q: How often do you use or spend time in/around the green spaces within a 15-minute walk or wheelchair journey from your home? Base: All respondents (n=1009).

2. Whilst large sections of the public are broadly satisfied, some groups tend to have lower access-to, and satisfaction-with, their local green space.

3. There is a desire to ensure the benefits of urban green space are achieved consistently across the North

4. There is also recognition that green spaces could deliver more in the North, especially in relation to pressing economic, social and environmental challenges

- Whilst they can identify opportunities to improve their local parks and green spaces, at least 70% of the public in the North say they are very or fairly satisfied with the quality, amount and variety of green space within 15 minutes' walk of their home.
- However, satisfaction is not evenly spread, with people from ethnic minority backgrounds and those from lower socio-economic grades tending to express somewhat lower satisfaction.
- These groups also report access to less, and less varied, green space near their homes.
- Both stakeholders and the public recognise that the quality, amount and variety of green spaces are not equal across the North and see unequal access as contributing to social inequalities.
- There is strong support for ensuring that these benefits are being realised consistently across the North, through urban green spaces that are safe and usable.
- For stakeholders, green spaces could be going further in the benefits they deliver to support many of the North's key agendas:
 - For health stakeholders, this includes facilitating active travel, and utilising green spaces for social prescribing and other health prevention activity.
 - For environmental stakeholders, green space can improve biodiversity, flood management, and the overall look and feel of town centres.
 - For local authorities, there is a desire to see green spaces support Levelling Up in the North in terms of pride in place, the economic renewal of town and city centres, and job creation.
- Whilst members of the public rarely raise these wider benefits spontaneously, they respond very positively when presented with these ideas.

Barriers to development and improvement of green space in the North

Stakeholders acknowledge that the fiscal context of ever tightening public sector budgets, particularly at the local level, and wider challenges such as the rising cost of living, make this a particularly difficult time to build energy and momentum behind new green space initiatives.

Beyond these contextual challenges, however, this research suggests that **green space's potential is currently being held back by a combination of factors:**

1. There is little pressure for ambitious improvement from the general public in Northern towns and cities, the majority of whom are broadly satisfied with their local green spaces.

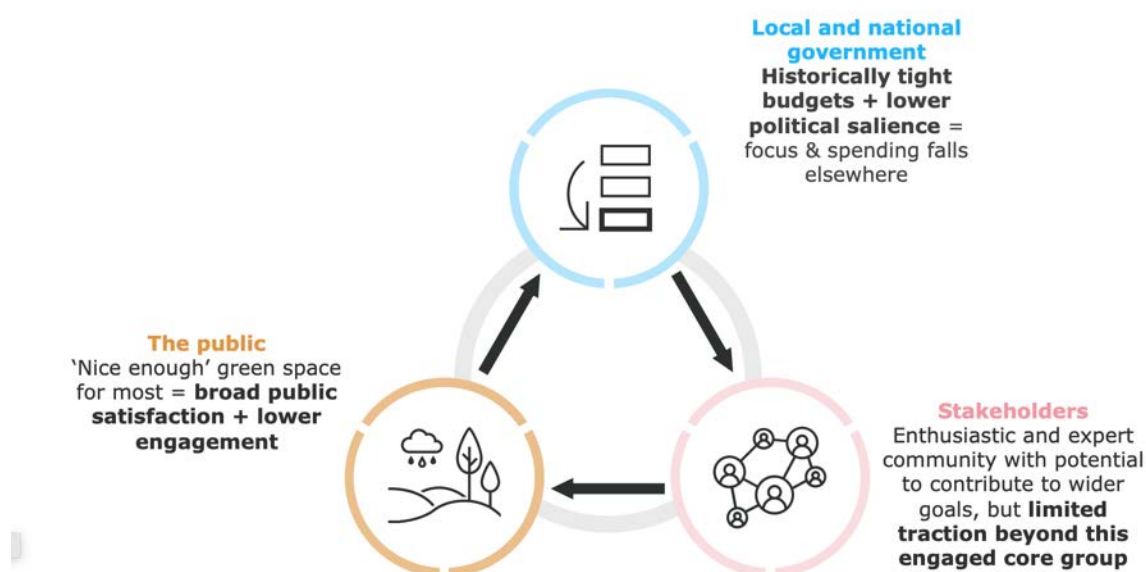
2. Those who report lower satisfaction and higher demand for improvement are often facing other challenges in their lives and neighbourhoods

3. In the absence of clear public demand for improvement, and in the context of ever tighter budgets, Local Governments in the North tend to focus scarce resources elsewhere

4. Stakeholders are convinced of the potential but feel isolated and unclear on how to realise the benefits of green space

- Most among the public see the green space near their homes as a 'pleasant' aspect of local life. Where there is desire for change, this is often limited to fixing 'the basics', such as adding benches or resurfacing paths.
- Whilst interest in significant improvement grows when they spend time engaging with the subject, in the absence of such time, space and information, most do not see improving green space as a local priority.
- Those groups who express lower satisfaction – in particular people from less affluent households and people from ethnic minority backgrounds – are also more likely to see improving green space as a priority.
- However, these groups and their communities also often face other challenges, and tend to prioritise issues such as anti-social behaviour and addressing economic decline over improving green space.
- Local Government stakeholders describe significant budgetary challenges facing their organisations.
- In this context, officials with a passion for green spaces find it hard to get traction outside of their teams and departments.
- This creates challenges in securing long term funding and resources, including staff.
- Many stakeholders have been 'banging this drum' for a while, with isolated examples of success, but limited systemic impact.
- Funding issues, an absence of a clear vision for the region, and difficulties in connecting the public, stakeholders, and local government to create momentum and effectively work together are seen as the biggest challenges to getting ideas off the ground.

Stakeholders, the public and local and national government seem to be 'locked' in a cycle which is preventing progress in the development and improvement of urban green spaces in the North.



Without sustained funding and a clear strategic plan for the North, there is a risk that green spaces will not only fail to meet their full potential, but could decline.

Opportunities to unlock the power of green spaces in the North

This research identifies a number of **insights that could help unlock the power of green spaces and access to nature for people and communities** in Northern Towns and cities:

INSIGHT	IMPLICATION FOR UNLOCKING CHANGE
1. There is widespread support for addressing inequalities in access to, and quality of, green space across towns and cities in the North	- The public recognise the personal and community benefits that high quality green space offers, and support ensuring those benefits are more evenly spread. - Those with lower access to quality green space are also more likely to see improving their green space as a priority for their local area. - All stakeholders, including those from economic, health and regeneration sectors see value in improving green spaces for their area.
2. Public passion, interest, ambition and engagement increases when people are given	When given the space, time, and information to engage more deeply with their local green spaces, people in the North of England move from an 'it's nice enough' view of their green space, to a deeper

time and space to focus on green space near their homes

3. Stakeholders feel there is untapped potential for cross sector working

4. Stakeholders across local government, the wider sector and beyond see public engagement with green space as a key factor in delivering change

5. To facilitate more ambitious change across the region, local engagement needs to be guided by a joined up, strategic plan for the North.

appreciation of both the benefits that green space delivers to them and their communities, and the ways in which their green space could be improved.

- Examples of 'what could be' - from green active travel routes to more trees and planting in city and town centres - incite excitement and passion for members of the public (although ensuring 'the basics' are fixed remains a priority).
- There is significant potential for cross-sector collaboration but few structures or joint targets to enable this to happen.
- Stakeholders also see the potential for green spaces to play more of a role delivering the key strategic objectives of the North and its towns and cities, e.g. health, resilience, growth, local pride by expanding the network of those engaged in green spaces.
- By increasing the salience of green space as a political priority (both directly and as a tool to support other agendas), greater resident involvement could potentially unlock new sources of funding, not just from local and national government, but local business or developers.
- This is about demonstrating to local decision makers, businesses and developers that there are motivated, energetic and engaged local people who would like to make their local green space better, and whose interest and ambition is supported by their neighbours and community.
- In order to truly drive change forward, local engagements must be co-ordinated at a regional level to ensure common goals, share best practice, and help improve access to greater political support, policy change and new funding routes

3. Unlocking the power of urban green spaces

These findings point towards three clear roles for partners and leaders in the North:

- 1. Targeting activity where need is greatest**
- 2. Supporting and sustaining very local public engagement**
- 3. Building momentum for regional or city-region level change.**

Below is an overview of our recommended approach:



Convening and coordinating to join up activity across towns and cities in the North by identifying 'best in class' - examples of research, showcasing projects in the region and beyond, and sharing and publicising common learnings.

The work here should include:

- **Establishing and communicating the role that green space in the North can play in delivering a range of key social and political agendas for the region.** This would include: Developing and marshalling the evidence base – collecting together case studies, evaluation work and examples of impact from across the region and beyond in a single resource⁴, identifying cross cutting themes and lessons, and making these available to stakeholders and advocates across the region – taking a lead in role in communicating the benefits of green space to communities and less-engaged stakeholders; and supporting a wider group of advocates to do the same. Areas of focus could include:
 - **Urban green spaces supporting the improvement of Northern towns and cities,** with historically tight budgets and ongoing funding

⁴ Sources of interest are e.g.

'Liveable Northern Towns and Cities – Nature North' <https://www.naturenorth.org.uk/business-case/liveable-northern-towns-and-cities/>

'Resource Hub – Future Parks Accelerator' <https://www.futureparks.org.uk/resource-hub>

cuts to local communities tying green spaces into the Levelling Up agenda is key for promoting the role of urban green spaces in the renewal of towns and cities, improving pride in place and opening up job growth and creation. This could open up investment opportunities such as the Shared Prosperity Fund, funding from the Department of Levelling Up Housing and Communities, the UK Infrastructure Bank. Investment should also be supported by a range of regional and local players such as NP11, Northern Powerhouse and the Metro Mayors.

- **Urban green spaces supporting climate resilience**, tapping into work already being done by local authorities on blue/green infrastructure, flood management and reducing the 'heat island effect', as well as potentially recommending further regulations via planning applications. This work would likely need to be incorporated into local authorities, but should be supported by statutory agencies such as Environmental Agency and Natural England, as well as local players e.g. North East England Climate Coalition and Zero Carbon Manchester.
 - **Urban green spaces supporting biodiversity**, through the planting of trees, creating urban wetlands, and implementing more 'wild' spaces throughout towns and cities. Connecting green spaces to enable species movement and adaptation will support long term outcomes. This work could be supported by academics and other environmental specialists as well as local authorities, conservation organisations, and statutory agencies. New funding routes such as the Biodiversity Net Gain scheme could be explored here.
 - **Urban green spaces supporting health and wellbeing**, which should highlight the role urban green spaces could play in preventative health strategies. This could include (but shouldn't be limited to) social prescribing as well as encouraging the repurposing of NHS land into green spaces to support public mental and physical health. Support from GP commissioning groups, hospital trusts, public health representatives at local authorities and national agencies such as the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities would be key both for accessing funding and implementing initiatives.
 - **Urban green spaces supporting active travel**, for example through the creation of 'green corridors' in towns and cities, as well as more simple changes such as improved pathways. This could open up new investment opportunities such as the potential for Active Travel funding to be diverted. Such work would need to be taken forward not only by local authorities but transport representatives and urban planners.
- **Facilitating cross sector collaboration and knowledge sharing:** There is a clear coordination role to facilitate collaboration across different sectors and geographies to allow for better sharing of expertise. This will be key in creating green spaces that deliver multiple benefits, but could also be used to support joint funding bids. Regional work should ensure learnings are shared

and a clear evidence base of case studies and proven impact is built over time.

- **Identification of required policy changes to support urban green space development:** Within this research, several policy change ideas such as making the provision of green space a statutory duty and the legal access to nature were tested⁵. While popular with many stakeholders, local authorities rejected ideas that could result in additional responsibilities without additional support or funding. Unified work should be done to identify potential policy changes that can support green space development without putting undue pressure on one group.

Targeted activity and more resources are needed to deliver better green spaces to areas with the lowest access to green space and highest social need.

While an overarching vision and strategy is necessary, local engagement is key for demonstrating the topic's political salience and increasing public demand for improvements to urban green spaces for those that need it most.

Across all audiences, there is widespread support for initiating public engagement in the areas that need it most.

- Both the public and stakeholders recognise that there is inequality of access to nature and green space across the North.
- A lack of green space and/or poorly maintained spaces is felt to play a key role in the overall perceived deprivation of an area.
- Members of the public who have the lowest access to green spaces are most likely to see improving green spaces as bigger priority.
- There are several existing place-based initiatives in the North where green spaces could play a more critical role in supporting strategic objectives, for example Levelling Up Partnerships, Towns Fund.

Partners should combine their spatial data (which shows which geographies have the lowest access to green space across the North), with the areas where there are stakeholders ready to take action, to identify places of highest priority. Stakeholder readiness might look like political interest, local ambition, partner engagement, for example. This work should also take into account places where the Government and agencies have also prioritised place-based initiatives such as Levelling Up and Towns Fund to enable leveraging and efficient use of public funding.

Piloting and rolling out new models of very local engagement, co-creation and activation.

With areas identified, partners should select two-three places to develop pilot case studies of local engagement. Given that there are many previous and current

⁵ Detailed feedback on this testing can be found in the full report.

examples of local engagement to improve green spaces, it will be important to review and learn from these projects. There are several plans and projects that are current or in development that could contribute to impactful participation.

Based on the experience of engaging local people through this project, a potential model could be:

Get people looking afresh at <u>their</u> green space	When residents take time to focus on the green space near their homes 'nice enough' satisfaction quickly gives way to both a heightened understanding of the role they play and gives ideas for improvement. This supports research which suggests people, especially children, feel disconnected from nature despite its value to wellbeing.	Engage residents to build a neighbourhood vision for green spaces
Ensure two-way inspiration between stakeholders/local leaders and residents	Even when engaged, public thinking tends to be focused on 'the basics'. But exposure to stakeholder ideas and examples leads to creative and energised conversations. Seeing how residents adopt and adapt their vision for green spaces will both ground stakeholder thinking and could offer a source of renewed energy.	
Build action teams of resident champions and expert stakeholders	Even where an engagement leads to an exciting local vision, only a few residents have the bandwidth and motivation to stay engaged. These individuals need to be supported with structures, tools and a plan to keep momentum and stay connected to the wider community.	Structured local organising with a core team
Place residents at the front to engage wider stakeholders and secure funding	Clear evidence of resident engagement will be key for getting more generalist stakeholders involved – particularly local politicians and businesses, but also 'outer circle' stakeholders (such as public health).	

Even after being exposed to inspiring visions of what green spaces could look like or how more green space could be created, the public tends to support such investment more if what is already there is improved first. As such, the process will need to agree how the ambitions of stakeholders and priorities of residents can be matched. This will likely mean a combination of the following types of initiatives:

- **Improving and maintaining current green spaces.** Through additional facilities and amenities as well as general maintenance of footpaths, improved safety and security, greenery and social areas. People want to feel that local places are being cared for and loved.
- **Ensuring green spaces enable nature and wildlife to thrive.** Through more designated (but still accessible) 'wild' areas and initiatives to support growth. Water is particularly valuable for the public.
- **Using green spaces to improve broader community, environmental and health outcomes.** Through direct and indirect initiatives – including 'building in' climate adaptation.

Following pilots, successes should be evaluated and learnings shared to refine this model and facilitate further roll out. The expansion of case studies across the North can then be built into one growing evidence base, to make the case for further development.

4. Background and methodology

4.1 Background

The 'Urban Nature North' (UNN) project, funded by National Lottery Heritage Fund, is led by the National Trust on behalf of the wider Nature North network. The Nature North network is a partnership of organisations that are making the case for transformational investment in the North of England's natural assets, leading to green growth, levelling up, nature recovery, and carbon net zero.

Nature North is developing a number of Investable Propositions (IPs) to facilitate and shape this investment. The Urban Nature North project informs the insight gathering phase of Nature North's IP for Liveable Towns and Cities. Other IPs relate to coast and estuaries, rivers, Northern Forest, peatland restoration (Great North Bog), infrastructure, and farming. More information about Nature North and its projects is available on the website www.naturenorth.org.uk.

The UNN project has sought the views of the public and stakeholders to understand how to create ambitious change and unlock investment for public green spaces in the towns and cities of the North. To achieve this, a range of consultants have supported lines of enquiry relating to the following areas:

Access to green space: Using Natural England data, the National Trust has found that a large proportion of people in the North do not currently have the recommended levels of access to green space within 15 minutes walk. Some of the most deprived communities also suffer from lack of access.

Economic value: Consultants -eftec have demonstrated the significant current value of accessible urban green spaces in the North, estimated as a minimum of £2,700 million per annum. Substantial value to communities are provided from their welfare, physical and mental health, and air quality benefits.

Community and stakeholder engagement: Thinks Insight and Strategy were commissioned to conduct independent research with the public and stakeholders, hearing their views about the future of green spaces and how their benefits could be increased and sustained.

Making it happen: Pulling together the research and insight, Thinks Insight and Strategy have developed this report to outline what needs to happen to catalyse ambitious change which unlocks the power of urban green space in the North.

This report shares findings from the community and stakeholder engagement. More information about these other outputs are available on the Nature North website (www.naturenorth.org.uk).

Throughout the research, a green space was described to include any of the following: public park, sports pitch, pocket park, community park, playgrounds, natural play space, nature reserve, woods, coastline, informal green space, planting or greenery along streets, allotments, cemetery, cycleways and green paths.

4.2 Methodology overview

To understand what change is needed for urban green space in the North, Thinks Insight & Strategy conducted a multi-stage research project with stakeholders and members of the public across the North.

Public research with residents of Northern Towns and Cities	Stakeholder research
7-day online community 57 members of the public across the north	4 x 90-minute scoping workshops with 32 stakeholders
6 x 3 hour in person workshops with same research participants	4 x 60 90-minute thematic workshops with 31 stakeholders from health, social, environment and local authorities
10 question online survey with 1009 residents across the North	11 x 40-minute depth interviews with specialist stakeholders in health, local regeneration or finance
	2 x full day place-based workshops held in Manchester and Newcastle with 23 stakeholders from health, regeneration, environment and community

4.3 Sample overview

The public sample was made up of urban areas of the North of England. Where the report refers to the 'public', it is therefore referring to public residents of Northern towns and cities.

57 members of the public took part in the qualitative component of research, across the following 6 locations⁶: Bolton, Bradford, Darwen, Gateshead, Hull and Liverpool.

A further 1009 members of the public also took part in a quantitative survey. Here the public sample came from one of three regions – the North East, North West or

⁶ Locations were selected by UNN based primarily on data indicating that they currently have poor access to green space and to represent a range of urban typographies.

Yorkshire and Humberside. Respondents were either from urban areas (defined as towns or cities with a population of over 10,000) or semi-urban areas (smaller towns or suburbs of cities with a population of over 2,500).

72 stakeholders took part in the research through either an online depth interview or workshop. These stakeholders were identified by Urban Nature North partners and recruited through Thinks Insight & Strategy. They included individuals with backgrounds in the environment, health, academia, finance and regeneration, as well as representation from local authorities and NGOs. A full list of organisations can be found in the Appendix.

Throughout the research, a series of different initiatives and ideas were tested, including future visions for green spaces, local authority initiatives and potential funding options. Detailed feedback on these things can be found in the full report. This report is focused on sharing the final recommended approach.

5. The public view

Green spaces play a positive, but under-valued role in the life of the public in towns and cities in the North of England.

Across the North, most people have access to some green space and use them frequently, with two thirds reporting that they use or spend time in the green spaces within 15 minutes of their home at least once a week or more⁷. Such spaces are felt to be a hugely important part of people's lives, relied upon for exercise, socialising and as a way to escape the busyness of urban life and connect with nature.

"We use them on a regular basis and they are usually just nice places to visit. we appreciate the freedom and pleasure of being outdoors."

Public, Gateshead

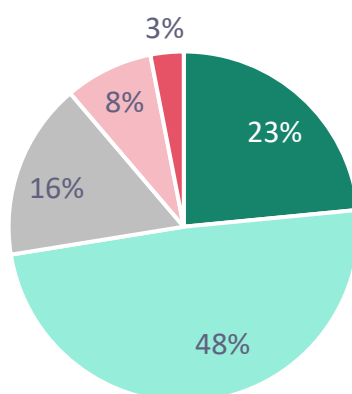
"Who can't love a big, open, beautiful green space?"

Public, Liverpool

Most people across the North already see their local green spaces as a pleasant part of their neighbourhood. Satisfaction with the quality, amount and variety of green spaces is good overall, with most feeling that any type of green space being made available to them is a positive.

■ Very satisfied ■ Fairly satisfied ■ Neither ■ Fairly dissatisfied ■ Very dissatisfied

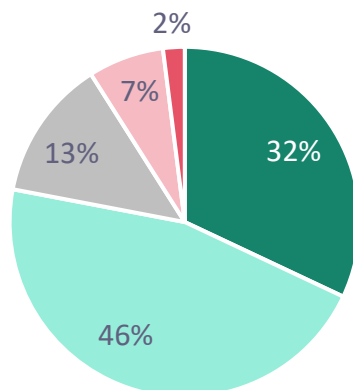
Quality & upkeep of green space



72% of the public are very (23%) or fairly (48%) satisfied with the overall **quality and upkeep** of green spaces within 15 minutes of where they live. 11% say they are very (3%) or fairly (8%) dissatisfied.

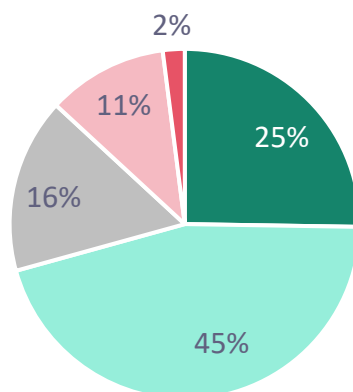
⁷ Q: How often do you use or spend time in/around the green spaces within a 15-minute walk or wheelchair journey from your home? Base: All respondents (n=1009).

Amount of green space



78% of the public are very (32%) or fairly (46%) satisfied with the **amount** of green space available to them / their family within 15 minutes of where they live. 9% say they are very (2%) or fairly (7%) dissatisfied.

Variety of green space

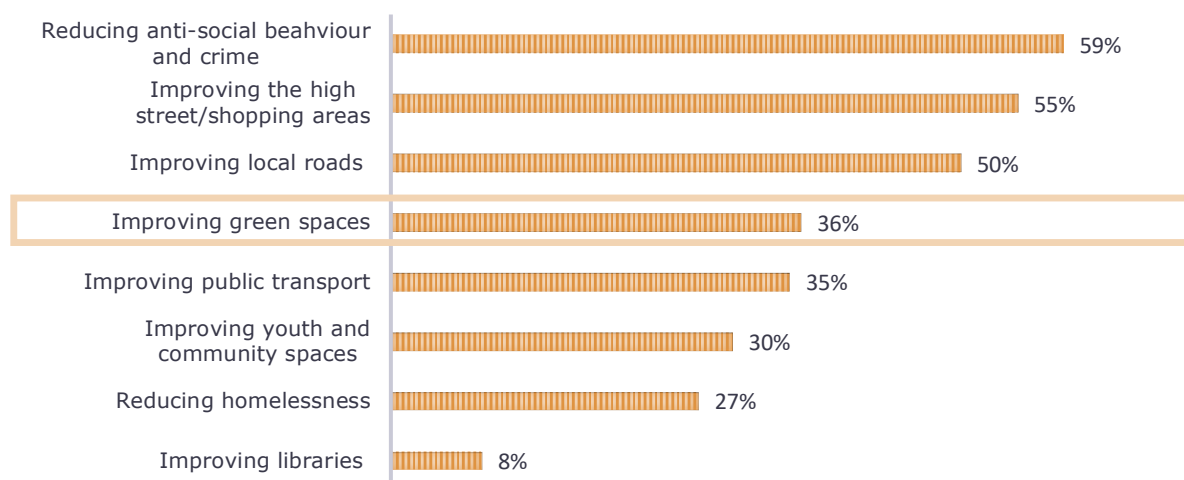


70% of the public are very (25%) or fairly (45%) satisfied with the **variety** of green space available to them / their family within 15 minutes of where they live. 14% say they are very (2%) or fairly (11%) dissatisfied.¹

With so many local green spaces in their current form already offering clear benefits to the public, most don't spend much time thinking about how they could be improved despite their high usage and reliance on them. Furthermore, while improvements to green space are somewhat of a priority, this falls behind other seemingly more pressing issues in towns and cities. From a list of eight potential areas of improvement, 36% of the public select it as a top three priority, behind reducing anti-social behaviour and crime (59%), improving the high street (55%) and improving local roads (50%).

Public priorities for their towns / cities⁸

% who selected option in their top three



However, the perceived importance of green spaces is higher when the public consider them in detail. During the in-person sessions, their enthusiasm for improving green spaces became particularly evident when ideas for making their green spaces better were shared and discussed, while they also displayed deep concern when imagining losing any of the green spaces they have. In this setting, the public place a higher priority on green space provision, even while continuing to show concern over other important social issues such as the cost-of-living crisis, healthcare, crime, education and housing. They make the point that green spaces can be especially important during difficult times, having a positive impact on wellbeing and mental health, as exemplified during the pandemic. Giving the public a platform to consider how green spaces can have wider positive effects, may build further support for making green spaces better and unlocking change.

The public engage most deeply and become most energised when they spend time thinking about the green space in their immediate neighbourhoods and communities.

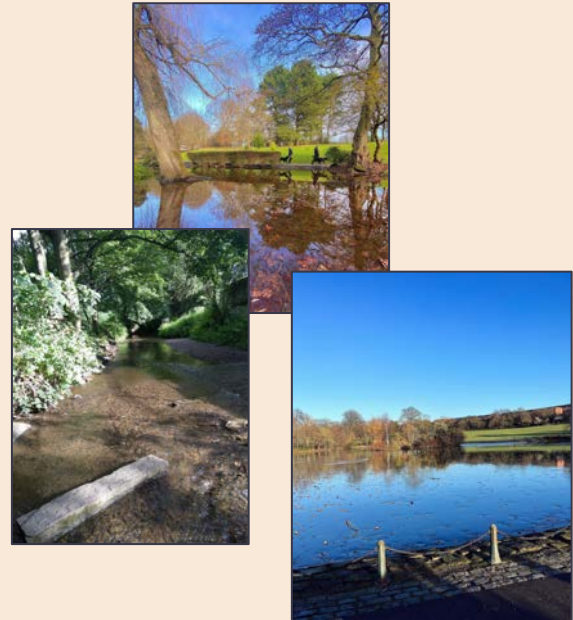
There is strong recognition of and appreciation for the personal, community and societal benefits green spaces deliver in general, which include facilitating a healthier lifestyle, offering a place to socialise, supporting wildlife and natural habitats, and contributing to a sense of place.

⁸ Q: Here is a list of things that could be a priority for your town or city. Please select three options that you think are the most important. Base: All respondents (n=1009).

The public cite the following benefits of green spaces:

- Improving physical health, through both formal and informal exercise.
- Improving mental health and wellbeing, both due to the associated benefits of physical activity and the general benefits of being outside / in nature.
- Offering a free and accessible place to socialise with others.
- Giving access to certain facilities and activities e.g. sports pitches or courts, particularly for young people.
- Delivering a sense of community cohesion, inclusion and belonging.
- Contributing positively to a sense of place in local areas.
- Supporting local wildlife and natural habitats, as well as delivering broader environmental benefits to urban environments.

Popular green spaces in the North, including Sefton Park in Liverpool, Saltwell Park in Gateshead and a woodland in Bradford:



However, it is when a local lens is applied to thinking about green spaces that the public really come alive. In these conversations, it became clear that the public have the strongest connection to the places near to them, speaking passionately about the value they offer to them personally, and the memories they hold. These feelings have undoubtedly been amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic, in which 'the local' became more important than ever.

"COVID-19 helped people discover new places around them and they're still using them now."

Public, Gateshead

"I remember a few years back and there was a fantastic old school rock festival in the local park I attended with my friends and it was just the perfect setting!"

Public, Hull

Because of this, the public strongly support the idea that everybody – in particular children – should be able to access the benefits that green spaces offer.

"For me as a dad, when my son was younger, having access to playgrounds and outdoor spaces was really important. I think every community has a right and should have those as a given."

Public, Bolton

There is also recognition that the quality, amount and variety of green spaces is not equal across the North generally, and throughout individual towns and cities. Those who have less access to green space and those who indicate lower satisfaction (who are often the same people) are more likely to see improving green space as a priority. Similarly, those who are better served by the green spaces they have, agree that development in areas where this is not the case should be prioritised.

52%

Of the public who are very or fairly unsatisfied with the **overall quality and upkeep of green spaces within 15 minutes of where they live**, put improving green space as a top 3 priority where they live. In comparison, only 33% of those very or fairly satisfied make this a priority.

67%

Of the public who are very or fairly unsatisfied with the **amount of green space available to them / their family within 15 minutes of where they live**, put improving green space as a top 3 priority where they live. In comparison, only 32% of those very or fairly satisfied make this a priority.

57%

Of the public who are very or fairly unsatisfied with the **variety of green space available to them / their family within 15 minutes of where they live**, put improving green space as a top 3 priority where they live. In comparison, only 32% of those very or fairly satisfied make this a priority.⁹

⁹ Q: Here is a list of things that could be a priority for your town or city. Please select three options that you think are the most important. Base: All participants (n=1009).

Satisfaction with local green space varies with socio-economic grade¹⁰, and ethnic background, as shown in the table below¹¹:

	Quality and upkeep	
	Satisfied	Dissatisfied
61+ years old	78%	8%
Socio-economic grade AB	74%	13%
White ethnicity	73%	11%
31-45 years old	69%	16%
Ethnic minority	64%	16%
Socio-economic grade DE	67%	12%

¹⁰ Socio-economic grade is a way to classify respondents based on the occupation of the person in their household with the highest earnings. Socio-economic grade AB includes higher or intermediate level managerial, administrative or professional jobs. Socio-economic grade DE includes semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers, and those who are on a state pension, casual or lowest grade workers, or those who are unemployed with state benefits only.

¹¹ Thinking about the green space within a 15-minute walk or wheelchair journey from your home, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with each of the following? Base: All respondents with a green space within 15-minutes of their home (n=992), 61+ years (n=287), SEG AB (n=353), white ethnicity (n=827), 31-45 years old (n=272), ethnic minority (n=159), SEG DE (n=202). NB: The table above shows satisfaction scores for quality and upkeep of green spaces, but satisfaction with other factors (amount/variety) vary in similar ways.

Given the space and time to think in depth about their green spaces, the public in northern towns and cities often identify lots of ways that the spaces that are there could be improved.

When asked about the improvements they would like to see to their local green spaces, the public's starting point is fixing what they see as 'the basics'. These things – which are felt to directly impact the amount of time spent in green spaces – include:

- Improving the maintenance of greenery, walkways and facilities within green spaces, as well as the general issue of litter.
 - Creating more facilities, including lack of accessible toilets and cafés.
 - Installing good quality lighting and / or security cameras.
 - Taking steps to reduce anti-social behaviour and crime.
 - Installing a higher number, and different types, of seating options.
 - Considering ways for green spaces to play a bigger role in local communities, in particular for young people.
- 25% of the public think it is definitely or somewhat true that their green spaces are scruffy and badly maintained.
 - More than half of the public thinks it is definitely or somewhat untrue that their local green spaces provide accessible toilets (55%) and offer good places to get food and drink (52%).
 - 49% of the public believes it is definitely or somewhat untrue that local green spaces feel safe after dark. This is highest amongst females (54% vs 44% of males).

12

"We need more benches in place for people to sit and chat - I think green spaces need to be a place for people to be able to come together and socialise."

Public, Darwen

"A couple of local parks have anti-social behaviour that is difficult to tackle with the lack of local police/security on the ground."

Public, Gateshead

Exposure to new ideas and examples of how green spaces could deliver more are inspiring and exciting for members of the public.

Upon being shown inspiring examples of what urban green spaces in the North could look like, the public are enthusiastic about broader, more innovative initiatives such as green corridors and the planting of wildflowers.

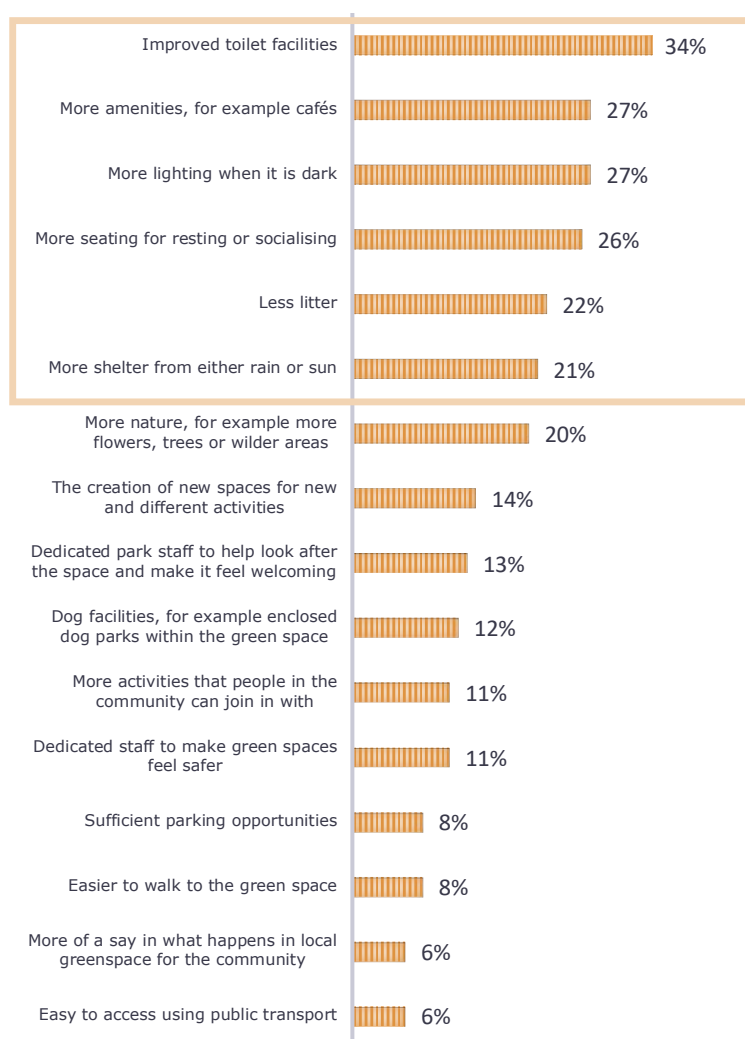
In particular, they are energised by the prospect of bringing in more wildlife to their urban environments, and in using green spaces as a tool to support broader environmental and health outcomes.

¹² Q: Thinking overall, how far do each of the following statements describe the green space within a 15-minute walk or wheelchair journey from your home as a whole? Base: All those who have one of the types of green space included in their town or city (n=991)

Nonetheless, more ambitious change cannot come at the expense of 'the basics'. The basics – toilets, paths, lighting and seating – remain a priority, with most struggling to get behind larger scale change if these aren't delivered within their current green spaces first. This stems from a desire to ensure that current spaces meet their full potential alongside a concern that 'grander plans' might be prioritised over simply making the best possible of what's already there.

Factors to encourage usage of green spaces¹³

% ranking factor in their top three



"I would first try and improve the green spaces we have first. I think having more available and accessible places will keep encouraging people to utilise the space more. I would want to make it accessible to everyone; all ages. That is important. Then I would want to build and expand the green spaces."

Public, Bradford

¹³ Q. What do you think would encourage you to use or spend time in/around the green spaces within a 15-minute walk or wheelchair journey of where you live more often? Base: All who have a green space within 15 minutes of their home (n=992).

6. Stakeholders' view

Stakeholders understand the value and potential of green spaces, but feel their potential is significantly impacted by funding and resourcing challenges.

Stakeholders build on the benefits named by the public by also citing the following additional benefits:

- The role of green spaces in establishing towns and cities as economically and socially competitive, including bringing in inward investment.
- Further environmental benefits, including biodiversity, natural flood risk management, cooling and heat capture, contributing to net zero and improving air quality.
- Further community benefits, including greater social cohesion and creating spaces of belonging and providing a catalyst for greater civic participation.
- How important good green spaces are in low income areas, as they offer much needed outside space, reduce isolation and improve health outcomes, all issues that are more likely to be prevalent in these areas.
- The opportunity green spaces offer for CSR and filling environmental requirements for developers, landowners and corporates.

A cross-section of organisations and sectors were consulted for this project, including: public health, transport, local authorities, voluntary and community representatives, environmentalists, urban design and planning, business and tourism. All saw the benefits and value of green spaces to their objectives. Most expressed frustration that they could not collaborate more, experience sustained appropriate levels of funding, and a higher level of political priority.

Stakeholders echo and expand upon the public's enthusiasm for good quality green space. They are passionate about the wide-ranging benefits, and are eager to highlight the additional potential benefits

that further green space development could deliver to towns and cities across the North if implemented.

They are most enthusiastic about the opportunity for green spaces to support wider political agendas, such as:

Climate resilience	Including flood management and urban cooling.
Supporting biodiversity	Through planting more trees throughout towns and cities, and implementing more 'wild' spaces.
Health and wellbeing	Including social prescribing and repurposing NHS land into green spaces designed to support mental and physical health.

Broader town and city improvement	Tying work to the Levelling Up agenda, and using green spaces to renew towns and cities, improve pride in place and facilitate job growth and creation.
Active travel	For example, through the creation of 'green corridors' to be used for walking and cycling.

"Where do you start when the list [of benefits] is so huge? Probably community cohesion, bringing diverse communities together."

Stakeholder, Local Authority

"What a pocket park could do in terms of being multifunctional urban green space, it doesn't have to be massive. I think there's a lot of things we could add to that, both in terms of biodiversity opportunities, but also as places to sit. You could actually have a bit of investment benefit a whole lot of people around mindfulness, these can be places of sanctuary."

Stakeholder, NGO

Despite this, stakeholders often struggle in getting ideas off the ground due to several key challenges:

- **A lack of funding:** Both in terms of an overall lack of funding, and that revenue funding in particular is provided on a short-term basis, preventing longer term projects and leading to ongoing erosion of skilled staff. This reduces tolerance of risk and hampers strategic thinking and innovation. To counter a lack of funding, new funding routes such as Biodiversity Net Gain scheme or Active Travel funding should be explored.
- **Limited land and new spaces:** There is limited land available, and limited influence over private land, as well as challenges in balancing different priorities for land use e.g. housing developments.
- **A lack of resources and ambition:** Structures supporting collaboration between sectors and stakeholders are lacking, especially between the private and third sectors. This is exacerbated by an absence of guidance and best practise on this issue within the sector. In the North, structural collaboration should be a benefit of the devolved Combined Authority structures.

Local government stakeholders also cite additional, specific challenges that they face:

- **Lack of recognition of the importance and value of green spaces:** the provision of green space is reportedly not recognised as an important policy area within local government. Therefore, in the face of difficult funding choices, green projects are often cut, viewed as 'nice to have'. This could be resolved either by increasing political salience through community activation, or it could be helped by developing more usable models to show the return on investment.
- **Inconsistency:** stakeholders claim that inconsistent conditions across different local areas, often within the same town or city, make it difficult to replicate good ideas or practices. This relates to the fact that good ideas often rely on a range of factors, including local engagement, NGO involvement, and private funding.

While many good examples exist across the North, stakeholders struggle to make systemic change, and can be left feeling that they are talking to themselves.

Stakeholders reference many good examples of green space development across the North, which include examples of collaboration with local communities, finding creative ways to fund projects, setting ambitious targets and working at scale.

However, many of these initiatives exist in isolation, and are not representative of systemic change. As such, they can be difficult to replicate.

The result of this – and the aforementioned challenges – is that many stakeholders feel that they are not able to make progress in improving green spaces in Northern towns and cities.

There is a view that while an engaged inner core dedicated to green space development are aligned with what they want to achieve, they struggle to gain traction in public interest, as well as with outer circle stakeholders (such as those working in adjacent fields such as health) and decision-makers in local authorities. They are crying out for additional support, as well as a joined-up strategy to guide their work.

Examples of good work:

Wigan Flashes Local Nature

Reserve: this project is frequently mentioned as an example of a local authority using initiative and ambition to transform a former industrial space into a nature reserve that benefits both the environment and local residents simultaneously.

Feed Leeds: this sustainable growing network is praised for mapping different communities, organisations and individuals together across Leeds, providing a network of green space and food growing that has multiple benefits for local residents.

Green Space as health agenda:

Doncaster is an example of a local authority linking green space to a health agenda, allowing it to hold on to more dedicated staff, improving its green space and providing important health benefits for the community.

Harnessing the power of local people through a co-ordinated, joined up approach, is seen as important in building momentum for green space development, as well as ensuring longer term success.

Stakeholders see the public as being central to green space development for two practical reasons:

- Basing new initiatives on a genuine understanding of community needs will ensure that they are widely used and valued.
- To ensure that residents feel a sense of ownership of their spaces, which will help ensure they are looked after over time.

Local engagement is also seen to be key in helping to build momentum for green space development by helping to 'make the case' for further work and potential access to new sources of funding, by better demonstrating public need and support. While it is understood that active participation is not for everybody, identifying a core group of engaged resident 'champions' is thought to be key in gaining local traction.

Key to this is that local engagement does not exist in isolation, but as part of a larger, co-ordinated plan across the North that has a clear regional strategy.

"Not involving local communities in green space programs – you just can't do it. In order to develop successful programs you have to involve local community or there will be no longevity. They are the ones who stand to benefit the most from air quality and access to nature."

Stakeholder, Regeneration

"I think it's just a place for people to chat to their neighbours. Ask them what they're doing with the day and it's a great place to build trust. These are things that are massively undervalued when talking about community strength, and I think social spaces like this play a large role."

Stakeholder, Think-Tank

"In my view, if we had an open door to bring in expertise, resource and commitments, it could join up with health and wellbeing to deliver projects in the corridor area and the wider urban fringe."

Stakeholder, Local Authority

7. Appendix

We would like to thank the following organisations for contributing to this research:

- ARUP
- Asthma and Lung UK
- Bradford Council
- Byker Community Trust
- Canal and Rivers Trust
- City of Trees
- Durham County Council
- Eden Project
- Environment Agency
- Environment Agency Land Use Group
- Gateshead Council
- Gateshead Groundwork
- Greater Manchester Combined Authority
- Greater Manchester LEP (Local Enterprise Partnership)
- Greater Sport
- Green & Open Spaces (Parks and Countryside Service)
- Groundwork North West
- Northern Network (Green Community Hub Network)
- Green Flag Award
- Historic England
- Homes England
- Igloo Regeneration
- IntegreatPlus
- IPPR North
- Karbon Homes
- Lancs Wildlife Trust
- Leeds City Council
- Liverpool City Council
- Liverpool City Region Combined Authority
- Make Space for Girls
- Manchester City Council
- The Mersey Forest
- Middlesbrough Council
- National Lottery Heritage Fund
- National Trust
- Natural England
- Nature Finance
- Nature North
- Newcastle City Council
- North of Tyne Combined Authority
- Northern Lily
- Northumberland Wildlife Trust

- Office for Health Improvement and Disparities
- Oldham Northern Roots
- Peel L&P
- Peoples Powerhouse
- Planit-ie
- Rooted in Nature/MIND
- RSPB
- Salford City Council
- Seascapes (Durham Coast)
- Severn Trent
- Sheffield and Rotheram Wildlife Trust
- Sheffield City Council
- South Tyneside Metropolitan Borough Council
- Sow the City
- Sport England
- Standard Practice
- Stomping Ground Forest School
- Sustrans
- Tees Valley Local Nature Partnership
- The HEY Smile Foundation
- Trees for Cities
- Tyne Rivers Trust
- UK Onward
- University of Leeds
- University of Manchester
- University of York
- Urban Green Newcastle
- Urban Splash
- Visit County Durham
- West Yorkshire Combined Authority
- White Rose Forest
- Whitworth Gallery
- Woodland Trust
- Yorkshire NHS Ambulance Trust
- Yorkshire Wildlife Trust