

HPRU ECH consultive workshop on Greenspace, Natural Ecosystems and Public Health: November 2024

Summary Report

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Summary

The UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA), Office for Health Improvement and Disparities (OHID) and the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine collaborate through the NIHR Health Protection Research Unit in Environmental Change and Health (HPRU ECH) to increase the evidence base around the health impacts of environmental change. An online workshop ‘Greenspace, Natural Spaces and Public Health’ was held on the 7th of November 2024. The aim of this was to help shape research and develop of a framework that incorporates public health into greenspace and other aspects of spatial planning. A broad range of stakeholder organisations working in the natural environment and public health participated in the workshop. This report presents an overview of the workshop. Overall, there was a lot of interest from stakeholders in contributing to and using a framework that incorporates public health in greenspace planning. Stakeholders also discussed ways to increase access to greenspace, and where future research could be prioritised. This included barriers to access, how different populations access greenspace, who benefits, qualitative research, long term evidence, economic evidence and evidence focusing more closely on specific groups.

Introduction and Background

Greenspace and the natural environment have clear benefits to mental and physical health and is also an important part of mitigating the effects of climate change - for example by helping to cool the local environment, and reducing the damage done by flooding. However, the UK is facing a biodiversity crisis and a steep decline in the quality of the natural environment. Urban greenspace is also declining year on year. The provision of safe and accessible greenspaces should be considered in national and local spatial planning for health (National Planning Policy Framework 2024).

An online workshop ‘*Greenspace, Natural Spaces and Public Health*’ was held on the 7th of November 2024. The aim of this was to help shape research undertaken by the upcoming research programmes, and to contribute to the development of a framework that incorporates public health in greenspace planning. This included a range of professional stakeholders from different health and planning backgrounds. The three key aims of this consultative stakeholder workshop were:

- 1) Review the state of evidence on how natural ecosystems impacts health and identify barriers and enablers of evidence generation
- 2) Identify immediate and long-term priorities for public health research, aligned with policy objectives
- 3) Inform the development of a framework to integrate health in future greenspace planning.

This report summarises the discussions that took place during the workshop, focussing on the three objectives above. It is structured following three separate discussions that took place over the course of the workshop. Following the workshop the development of the framework is underway. All opinions are those of the participants and not the hosting organisations.

A range of professional stakeholders from different health and planning backgrounds were invited to attend, and twenty-six stakeholders attended the workshop on the day. Representatives were included from multiple national government organisations, local authorities and charities. The workshop was run by UKHSA Climate and Health Assessment Team (CHAT), Office for Health Improvements and Disparities (OHID) and London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM).

Key Messages

- To increase access to greenspace and the natural environment, considering individual community factors is key. Greenspace should be functional, and embedding into other areas (e.g. transport, schools, NHS, urban areas, housing (roofs and walls)) can also help increase access
- Ensuring quality *and* perceived quality is important. Qualitative research can help to define what communities perceive as quality greenspace.

- We must understand different barriers to access for different demographics, to ensure the right greenspace in the right space
- Integration across teams is necessary when planning quality and functional greenspace
- Interventions must be climate resilient and future proof, focusing on both long-term and short-term goals
- While some frameworks around greenspace planning already exist, a framework that includes public health would be a useful addition
- Including expected outcomes (specific and targeted) and case studies in future frameworks would be useful
- Language and jargon in Public Health and environmental sciences can be unfamiliar to other professions/roles, and can be a barrier to sharing information
- Linking greenspace planning to climate change policy is a good opportunity for increasing action
- When creating a framework, referencing evidence and existing policy (e.g. existing climate change policy), and any relevant statutory responsibilities could encourage action
- Priorities for research could include: barriers to access, how different populations access greenspace, who benefits, qualitative research, long term evidence, economic evidence and evidence focusing more closely on specific groups
- There is a disproportionate amount of research onto urban greenspace – particularly compared to coastal environments
- A lot of evidence already exists, however there are issues with capacity to engage with it and understanding how best to use it

Agenda

A series of topic-specific talks were given from researchers working at UKHSA, OHID and LSHTM. These were each followed by discussions from the participants around related questions. See the agenda below:

10:00 – 10:10	Introduction and welcome Scope and purpose of the workshop	Presenter: Andrew Netherton
10:10 – 10:30	Presentation – Access to greenspace	Presenter: Jennifer Israelsson
10:30 – 10:48	Breakout group discussions 1 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How could access to greenspace be increased or improved for public health benefits? - How can public health professionals contribute to greenspace policy? - What knowledge and evidence do they need? 	
Break [7 mins]		
11:00 – 11:20	Presentation 2 – Embedding public health into spatial planning policy	Presenter: Grace Turner
11:20 – 11:48	Breakout Discussion 2 – 30 mins Q1- What would you like to see in the framework? Q2 – Are you aware of existing frameworks for integrating public health into greenspace planning & how they could be improved? Q3 – How would you like to use the framework?	
Break [7 mins]		
12:00 – 12:10	Presentation 3 – Public health and natural environment – broadening the agenda – feedback from the PLANET Panel	Presenter: Peninah Murage

12:10 – 12:55	<p>Breakout discussions Discussion – 30 mins</p> <p>Discuss research priorities</p> <p>Q1 – How should we prioritise the research given the gaps in the evidence – e.g. ranked by ecosystem services or where there is greatest benefit for human health? Who benefits/disbenefits and can we address any inequalities?</p> <p>Q2 – What impedes research linking natural ecosystems and health outcomes and how can we advance evidence generation/evidence synthesis?</p> <p>Q3 – Do you have any current plans where public health input would be useful, what are the low hanging fruits for public health integration?</p> <p>Whole group discussion (15 minutes) - feedback/comments/questions</p>	
12:55 – 13:00	Wrap up– 5 mins	Sari Kovats

Review of the state of the evidence and identifying barriers and enablers of evidence generation

The first session presented the results from the systematic review on health outcomes associated with access to green and blue spaces and how this varies based in inequalities in England, and the review of local authority green infrastructure strategies.

The follow-on discussion was based around three questions as presented below.

How could access to greenspace be increased or improved for public health benefits?

Three main points came out from this discussion: better utilise existing systems, work together with communities, and the importance of quality. Participants highlighted the importance of health and greenspace promoting professionals getting involved early in long-term town planning to ensure greenspaces are given enough space. Local Nature Networks should also be better utilised to achieve change, and greenspaces should be better embedded into transport spaces. One way to support this would be to insert the green infrastructure standards framework into planning policies and the NPPF to ensure there is a shared narrative around the access need.

A key point for achieving better access is to work closely with local communities to better understand the wants and needs, but also to understand barriers to accessing greenspace in areas where there is good access but little use. Some participants suggested that there should also be more investment in green social prescribing and other community interventions.

Many participants highlighted the perceived importance of quality and safety of the space, and that both the actual and the perceived quality of the space needs to be considered. This should not just apply to new spaces but also for improving the access and use of existing spaces.

How can public health professionals contribute to greenspace policy

The main thing identified was to work closely with other groups to ensure public health is included in all policies and strategies. At a local level, embedding public health policies into the Local Plans and other planning document was specifically mentioned. However, some participants raised the point that better support and promotion of co-production at both national and local level is needed to allow public health professionals to contribute at the relevant stage.

What knowledge and evidence is needed

Although there are still areas where more evidence is needed, many participants highlighted that the bigger issue is the lack of capacity within organisations to engage with the evidence already available. There is a need to understand the overlaps between public health benefits and other policy areas where green spaces are created, improved and maintained to enable change. This was echoed in comments about strengthened links between evidence documents such as the National Ecosystem Assessment and planning strategies.

Areas where more evidence is needed are around understanding the different type of greenspaces required for different communities and vulnerable groups, and what behaviour change approaches are effective for increasing the publics' use of greenspaces. A stronger evidence base on how climate-resilient and future proof greenspaces should be designed without increasing the risk for vectors and aeroallergens also needs to be developed.

Multiple participants also raised the need for either economic benefits data, or other types of health benefits data that can be used in cost and benefits arguments to make the case for more and better greenspaces. One suggestion of developing a 'health net gain' tool similar to the 'biodiversity net gain' planning tool would also help with this.

An important point regarding evidence generation was the question around how strong the evidence must be to trigger action. Since there are great difficulties in environmental health research to achieve the robust quantitative evidence commonly required in public health due to ethical concerns, other forms of evidence must potentially be more widely accepted and adopted.

Identify immediate and long-term priorities for public health research, aligned with policy objectives

The evidence linking health outcomes to natural ecosystems (outside urban areas) is particularly sparse. Health research can expand this evidence base prioritising research in the following areas:

Immediate research objectives include understanding the impact of existing interventions including green and social prescribing. Likewise, in thinking of the implementation and assessment of activities with health co-benefits, there are opportunities to copy successful interventions such as parkrun which is supported by Sports England, an equivalent in rural areas could be planned entry-level forest walks.

Accessibility of greenspaces is a persistent challenge in both urban and rural environments. This is another ripe area for research which could prioritise questions such as 'who has or which groups have access', 'who benefits or disbenefits from increased access' and 'what is the impact on health', 'what are the health benefits of

incidental access, e.g. commuting to work/school vs. targeted access?’ and ‘what facilities can help boost access e.g. toilets, benches, others?’.

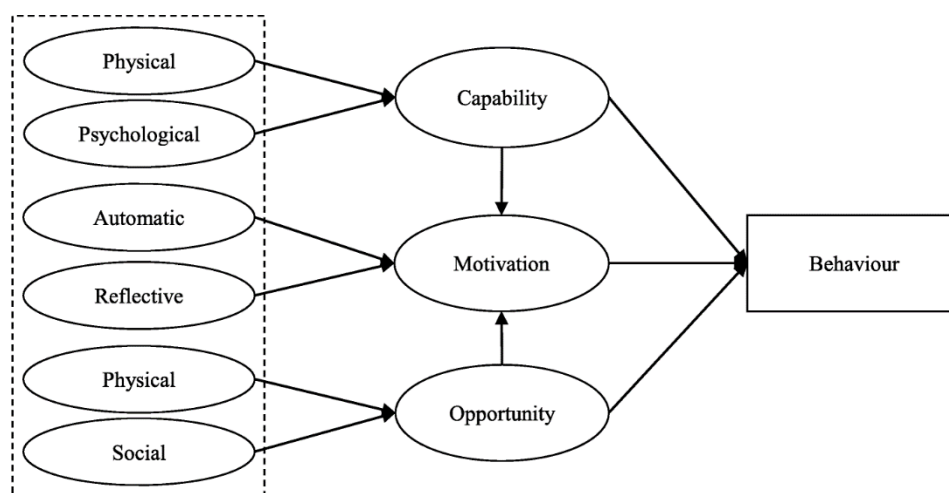
A building block to supporting evidence generation is developing a better definition of what constitutes ‘greenspaces’ and ‘natural environments’ and access to the spaces - although more advances have been made with the formers e.g. urban parks are fairly well defined. As green infrastructure is already will defined in planning policy, another way to support evidence generation could be to increase education on this existing definition. There remain significant challenges for example in categorising ecosystems and ecosystem services. This would ensure studies use standardised methodologies and would thereby support evidence synthesis by making it feasible to compare like with like and determine pooled health effects.

Other research priorities are more difficult to study and would require longer-term investment. Many of these present opportunities for increased integration between public health and other disciplines.

A research question that is of immense relevance to public health as well is determining the appropriate dose and response of accessing the natural environment, for example, what is the dose of accessible nature against the likelihood of people to use it? Is it better to have 5K loop or is 1K just as good? Other relevant area of work that can contribute to both health and environmental policies is conducting natural capital assessment, which is a comprehensive evaluation that quantifies all the health and well-being, economic and environmental contributions of the natural environment. There are also many opportunities for robustly integrating quantitative (such as cross-sectional studies) and qualitative evidence, including conducting longitudinal studies adjusted for confounding effects and stratified by inequalities/vulnerabilities.

Inform the development a framework to integrate health in future greenspace planning

One of the key objectives of this workshop was to inform the development of a framework to support the integration of health in greenspace planning policy and provide guidance and training for public health professionals. The discussion was framed around the results from the qualitative study which investigated how greenspace planning policy can effectively contribute to health improvement and reduce inequalities.



Note. Adapted from: “The behaviour change wheel: A new method for characterising and designing behaviour change interventions,” by S. Michie et al., 2011, *Implementation Science*, 6(1) p.42.

Figure 1. COM-B model used to frame results of the qualitative study examining perceptions of public health in greenspace strategies

Table 2: Proposed components of a public health and greenspace planning policy framework.

Domain	Objective 1	Objective 2
Capability	Training on health-orientated greenspace policy development Workshops or e-learning modules to planning staff on designing greenspace policies Training: impact of green spaces on physical and mental health, air quality, community cohesion, and climate change, aligned with urban design principles	Policy toolkit: templates and language for health-focused greenspace policy. Include examples of effective greenspace policies from other local authorities
Opportunity	Guidelines Provide structured guidance for regular collaboration between planning and public health departments on greenspace strategy development. Joint policy formulation, health metric integration, shared objectives	National and local policy alignment Encourage local authorities to align their greenspace policies with national health and planning policy objectives (e.g. alignment checklists)

	Host regular joint planning and health department workshops for drafting, revising, updating greenspace policy	
Motivation	Greenspace policy/strategy development Provide a tool that allows councils to track the impact of greenspace policies on community health outcomes Metrics to include physical activity levels, air quality improvements, mental health benefits, park usage rates etc.	

To gain feedback on the initial framework concept, we discussed the following questions:

What would you like to see in the toolkit or framework?

Table 2 outlines the possible contents of a framework for supporting public health and greenspace planning policy. The key points that were raised during this discussion was the importance of not duplicating existing work and ensuring that this framework is specific to support public health professionals at the local level. Many attendees strongly advocated for the framework to focus on content relevant to those working in public health so that this knowledge and guidance can be fed through to planning officers within local authorities. It was expressed that the framework would not be as useful if the aim is to provide materials which cater to both those working in public health and planning policy due to the differences in operation, language and approach.

Multiple participants highlighted the usefulness of including expected outcomes, similar to a Health Impact Assessment, with suggestions to embed this framework into the HIA process. Furthermore, the importance of using shared metrics with other stakeholders and providing specific health indicators which can be embedded in greenspace planning policy was welcomed by many attendees.

Other comments included ensuring the framework used a long term approach to avoid 'lock-in' greenspace planning policy scenarios which disbenefit health in the future. A

shared view was to align the framework with existing statutory responsibilities as a lever or opportunity to address health issues in greenspace planning policy.

The inclusion of successful case studies and examples of best practice was seen as important for the framework to feature. Additionally, providing evidence on the economic health benefits of greenspace. Other issues that were raised was for the framework to link with transport planning to boost active travel and engage with climate change adaptation and mitigation policy to optimise the co-benefits of these spaces.

Are you aware of existing frameworks for integrating public health into greenspace planning & how they could be improved?

The consensus was the proposed public health and greenspace planning policy framework was the first of its kind and would be a key tool for public health professionals to use that previously has not been available. However, some other frameworks that were highlighted as useful included the Standard Evaluation Framework although this could be improved to better align with statutory responsibilities. Discussions on the Green Infrastructure Standards framework published by Natural England was seen as a great example of developing greenspace planning at the national level. Other frameworks included the Healthy Streets Framework, NBSAP programme, parks for health (UCL) as well as the local nature recovery strategies and partnerships. Suggestions even included optimising the BREEAM building framework.

How would you use a toolkit or framework?

Key uses of the toolkit included the following:

- To re-enforce asks towards developers and planning applications
- To aid the Health Impact Assessment process of new developments
- Help guide introduction of health objectives in new and existing greenspaces within planning applications
- Support a clearer public health approach to greenspace planning policy
- Help formalise collaborative working between public health and planning departments and colleagues
- Access health indicators and metrics for monitoring and evaluation
- Highlight the benefits for different groups and help tackle health inequalities
- Prioritise the transparency of decision making in greenspace planning policy
- Cite health evidence and arguments to support or challenge greenspace planning decisions

- Provide training and upskilling for those working in public health on the natural environment
- Align national and local public health and greenspace planning policy objectives

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