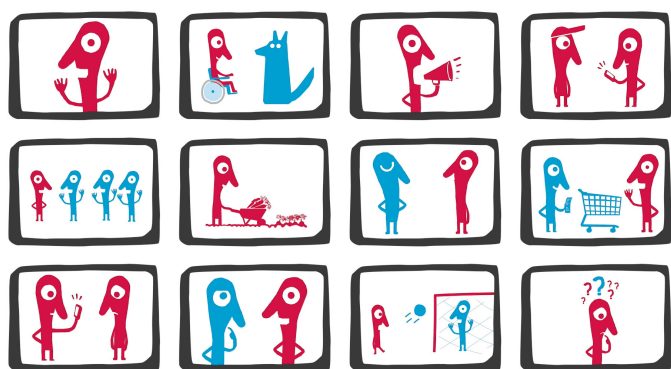


Wellbeing & Green Spaces: Why access to nature is essential to physical and mental health



“A healthy feeling comes in me when I go to the park and sit in a green environment.”

Policy & Practice Briefing

People's Voice Media

Sarah Henderson

May 2025



Executive Summary

This policy brief presents insights from lived experience stories of people who use – or would like to use – public green spaces. Based on 29 stories gathered over several years, we found that access to green spaces (parks in particular) has a positive impact on physical and mental wellbeing. Despite this, many people find barriers to access, while local authorities also cut funding.

Based on the presented insights, we present a series of recommendations for local authorities to improve access to public green spaces and ensure they remain at the hearts of the communities they serve.

Introduction

Earlier this year, the Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE) released their 2025 Parks and Greenspaces State of the Market report. In it, they reported that **80% of councils believe parks are being disproportionately affected by budget cuts despite 90% recognising that lack of investment in these spaces will have health and social impacts.** They also report a drop in the number of councils who believe the public should have free access to all parks (Association for Public Service Excellence, 2025).

In this briefing, we present insights from lived experience stories about the role of parks and green spaces in people's wellbeing, sharing policy and practice recommendations that local authorities can implement.

Key Insights

It is clear from people's experiences that access to green spaces – public parks in particular – has a positive impact on the mental and physical wellbeing. The below key insights highlight the main points people have shared in their stories.

Access to green spaces can promote emotional and physical wellbeing

I feel like a healthy feeling comes in me when I go to park and sit in a green environment and in fresh air, and when, during Covid, it was restricted to go in the park, we were like a prison in the house.

People report that being in nature can make them feel “calm and cool”, and that outdoor spaces are a good space to feel relaxed. The ability nature has “to restore you, to make you feel better” is profound.

Green spaces are a crucial mental health resource

When I was working, it was really part of my mental health plan to come for a very early morning walk, even if it meant putting the light on my on my phone.

One person reports how interacting with trees and seeing a hare made them feel “glad to be alive” after a challenging time, while others specifically say how they feel the mental health benefits of being out in the fresh air. People factor in spending time in nature to benefit their emotional wellbeing.

Green spaces need to be accessible for the whole community to tackle exclusion and isolation

It's basically inaccessible for anyone who's got mobility issues. Which is such a shame because it's such a fantastic facility, and it's really good for mental health.

Various accessibility issues prevent people using local parks. For instance, people mention that poor path conditions make navigating parks hazardous for elderly people. Flooding can put areas of park out of use throughout the year, and physical barriers designed to prevent vehicular access prevent access for those using mobility scooters.

Recommendations

To keep parks and green spaces at the heart of communities to continue benefitting wellbeing, we recommend that local authorities:

- **Co-create** a targeted programme of infrastructure improvement with a focus on accessibility and safety, in partnership with a diverse group of local community members
- **Prioritise** investment in enhancing the natural features of parks and the development of inclusive community spaces and activities, based on community needs.
- **Establish** a robust framework of community engagement and communication to encourage participation and coordinate volunteer efforts, creating stronger community links.

Method

Originating in 2007, Community Reporting has been developed across Europe as a mixed methodological approach for enhancing citizen participation in research, policymaking, service development, and decision-making processes. In-line with work such as Glasby (2011). Community Reporting purports the validity of lived experience and knowledge-based practice in these fields. It uses digital, portable technologies to support people to tell their own stories in their own ways and then connects these stories with change-makers in different settings and sectors.

The evidence that has informed this briefing has come from Community Reporter stories from people who regularly access – or would like to access – parks, green spaces, and other public natural settings. We have looked at 29 stories gathered across various projects, as well as independently, between 2019 and 2025.

About People's Voice Media

People's Voice Media is a civil society organisation established in 1995, that uses storytelling as a tool for social change in the UK and across Europe. In 2007 we launched the Community Reporting methodology and began to build the **Community Reporter Network**. The Community Reporter Network now

spans the UK and Europe, with 50+ active partner organisations from different sectors in the arenas of policy, research and services. This work is supported by **Esmée Fairbairn Foundation**

References

Association for Public Service Excellence, 2025. *Local Authority State of the Market 2025: Parks and Greenspaces*, Manchester: Association for Public Service Excellence.

Glasby, J., 2011. *Evidence, policy and practice: Critical perspectives in health and social care*. Bristol: Policy Press.

Contact details

Visit: <https://peoplesvoicemedia.co.uk>

Check out: <https://communityreporter.net/>

Email: enquiries@peoplesvoicemedia.co.uk