QUALITY OF LIFE FOUNDATION

Framework 2.0

Contents

The Quality of Life Framework 2.0

The Quality of Life Framework helps you to understand how your home and neighbourhood affects your health and wellbeing using six key themes; highlighting the evidence base for each of its constituent sub-themes. It is intended for use by community groups; housing developers, planners and designers; architects; investors; housing associations; operators; and local authorities.

This is the second version of the Framework. Since creating the first version in 2020, we have furthered our own understanding of what is needed at a local and national level to improve people's quality of life. We have done this by carrying out an evidence review, undertaking practical projects to implement best practice, and working directly on policy at a local and national level.

What is quality of life?

In 2019, the Quality of Life Foundation commissioned a literature review to explore what we mean when we say 'quality of life' and how it is affected by the built environment. The report concluded that there is broad agreement that quality of life is "the level to which individuals may feel their lives to be happy, active, sociable, interesting and meaningful". Since then, the Quality of Life Foundation has developed its understanding of quality of life and the factors that impact it through a range of research projects and community consultations across the four UK nations. Broadly, quality of life may be understood in terms of:

- health and its social determinants
- an individual's physical, social and psychological wellbeing
- social impact, which refers to the effect that an individual, organisation or project has on the long-term health and wellbeing outcomes of individuals and communities.

How can you use the Quality of Life Framework 2.0?

This version of the framework is intended as a guide with five distinct but interrelated uses (see page 6) that reflect the change we want to see in the creation and care of homes and neighbourhoods in the UK.

To further our charitable objectives, we encourage organisations to use the framework. To ensure that it is used responsibly, and to monitor the impact of our work, we ask that you use it under licence. For more details, see the Framework Licence Agreement.

QOLF Consulting, a wholly owned subsidiary of the Quality of Life Foundation, delivers services that fully operationalise the Framework through the whole life-cycle of a development or regeneration process. Please get in touch to find out more.

The change we want to see

Having a decent, affordable home in a safe, well-designed and resilient neighbourhood is the foundation of a healthy, happy life. But right now the UK is faced with a health and wellbeing crisis, partly determined by where people live.

The Quality of Life Foundation has a vision for homes and neighbourhoods that improve people's quality of life over the long term. And our mission is to make health and wellbeing central to the way we create and care for homes and neighbourhoods across the UK.

How the framework can help to deliver that change

1. **An enabling environment for prioritising health and wellbeing:** The Quality of Life Framework can help policy-makers and decision-makers to prioritise improving health and wellbeing outcomes through the decisions they make in planning, design, development and investment. Doing so will help to provide the context through which healthy urban development can be delivered at the local level.

2. **Engaged and equitable communities:** Having a sense of influence or control over our direct environment is a key contributing factor to our health and wellbeing and a key driver of equity within communities. The Quality of Life Framework is a way of starting a conversation within communities about the factors that are most important to people's quality of life. We believe that this conversation should start early and continue through the housing and neighbourhood development process to post occupancy. You can use the Quality of Life Framework in conjunction with the Quality of Life Code of Practice for community engagement to help achieve this.

3. **An evidence-based planning system:** The Quality of Life Framework helps architects, urban designers and planners to focus on the long-term outcomes of a place and the elements that are necessary to create resilient places that are better for people and the planet. By listening to residents on issues relating to the Framework's themes and learning from available data, we can make design decisions that improve safety, reduce pollution, improve biodiversity, encourage active travel and provide opportunities for people to connect with their neighbours.

4. **Stewardship plans for long-term social impact in every place:** Stewardship in housing and neighbourhoods refers to the long-term care of a place, from who picks up the litter to the presence of an active community group. Stewardship encompasses social, cultural, economic and environmental factors, as well as governance, and emphasises responsible and forward-thinking practices to create resilient and thriving communities. The Framework can help developers, housing associations, local authorities and the community to work in partnership to create stewardship plans and measures for determining success.

5. **The consistent evaluation of health and wellbeing outcomes:** To assess the impact of a development or intervention on a place, it is essential to measure any changes in that place. Does the intervention improve people's quality of life or make it worse? And how does it rate against similar projects? The Framework allows us to gather publicly available data through the Office for National Statistics or the census and map the local needs and community assets in a place with increasing accuracy. This data can be combined with feedback collected from engagement to create a much better picture of what a place is like and whether it is a success. This provides greater knowledge, driving greater value for developers and increasing accountability for the community, local authorities and investors.

Whether you are part of a community group or are a housing developer, a planner, designer, architect, investor, housing association, operator or local authority, we hope the Quality of Life Framework helps your efforts to create better health and wellbeing outcomes for all.
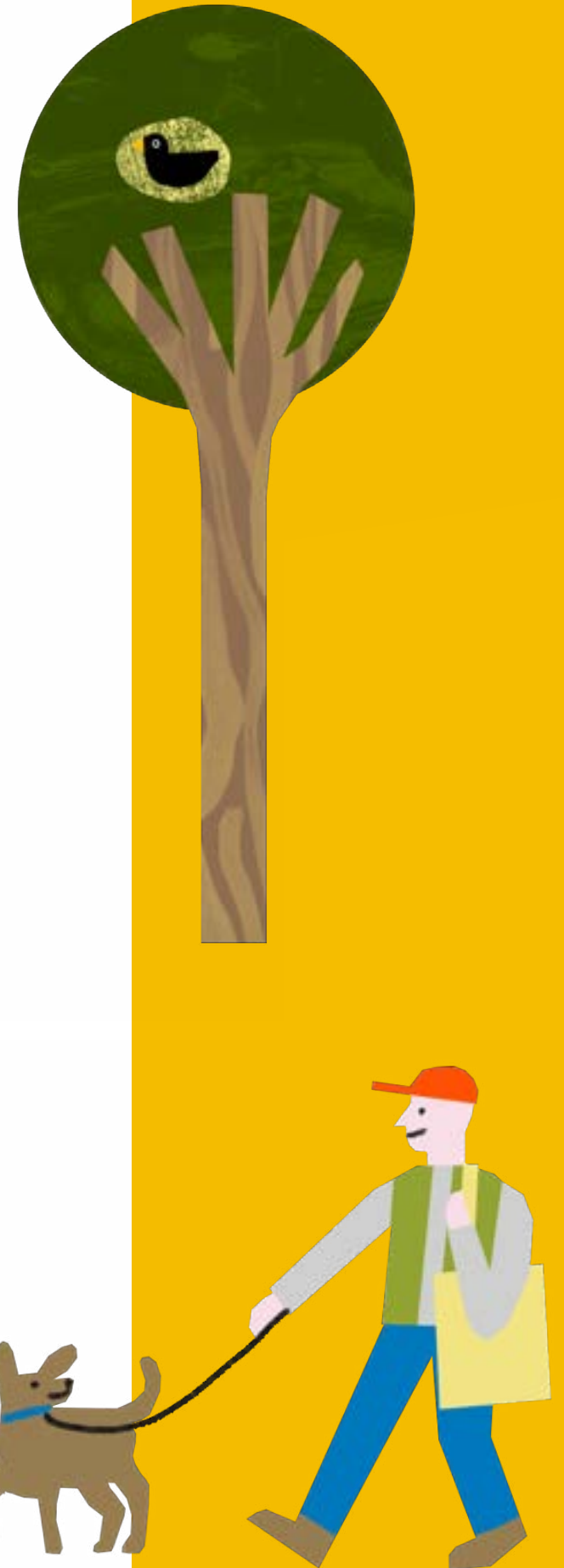
Quality of Life themes

A sense of control

- Influence and contribution
- Safety
- Affordability and permanence

Health equity

- Housing standards
- Air, noise and light
- Healthy food choices

Connection to nature

- Green and blue spaces
- Biodiversity
- Climate resilience and adaptation

A sense of wonder

- Distinctive design
- Culture
- Play and recreation

Getting around

- Walking, wheeling and cycling
- Public transport
- Cars

Connected communities

- Belonging
- Local businesses and jobs
- Local services

A sense of control

When we feel a sense of control in our lives, we are better equipped to overcome any challenges we might encounter. Having the ability to improve our area and address local problems can give us a sense of stability and security. Our neighbourhoods should provide us all with the opportunity to get involved in how decisions are made and set down roots in the long term.

Influence and contribution

What do we mean when we say influence and contribution?

At its most simple, a sense of influence and the ability to contribute to decisions affecting our environment can give us the freedom to hang a picture on a wall in our home. But in a broader sense, it can also mean having the opportunity to contribute our knowledge or to have a say in how our neighbourhoods are designed and managed. In our homes, this can be through the provision of living spaces we can make our own, and at a neighbourhood scale this could be regular engagement in local decision making or more hands-on, long-term, community stewardship.

In a neighbourhood, a sense of control can be achieved through community, tenants' and residents' groups, communication with local councillors, neighbourhood watch groups, parish councils, community land trusts, neighbourhood plan groups and civic societies. The involvement of the community in decision making, co-production and co-design (collaboratively designing together), and looking after local assets (e.g. community buildings and services, green and blue spaces, meanwhile spaces for activities, and public open spaces with facilities) is likely to improve feelings of agency and has a clear impact on health and wellbeing for all.

How does this affect health and wellbeing?

The health impact of giving communities a greater level of influence and control over decisions that affect their day-to-day lives is clear and well documented. The evidence particularly highlights the importance of influence in relation to quality-of-life outcomes.[1]

When done well, public participation can address power imbalances, foster relations, and create better connected communities. Participation can also create learning spaces stemming from local knowledge and generate positive outcomes on health behaviours, perceived social support outcomes and reduce overall opposition to development.[2, 3]

1   Reframing "participation" and "inclusion" in public health policy and practice to address health inequalities: Evidence from a major resident-led neighbourhood improvement initiative. by Lewis, S, et al. In Health & social care in the community 27, no. 1 (2019): 199-206
2   Community engagement to reduce inequalities in health: a systematic review, meta-analysis and economic analysis. O'Mara-Eves A, et al. In Public Health Res 2013;1(4)
3   Losing the local? Public participation and legal expertise in planning law. Abbot, C. In Legal Studies, vol. 40, no. 2, pp. 269-285; Public engagement with information on renewable energy developments: The case of single, semi-urban wind turbines. Parks, J.M. & Theobald, K.S. In Public Understanding of Science, vol. 22, no. 1, pp. 49-64; Participatory planning and major infrastructure: Experiences in REI NSIP regulation. Natarajan, L., Lock, S.J., Rydin, Y. & Lee, M. In Town Planning Review, vol. 90, no. 2, pp. 117-138.

Safety

What do we mean when we say safety?

Feeling safe inside our homes and within our neighbourhoods by day and night is fundamental to individual and collective wellbeing. We should be able to live in our homes and neighbourhoods free from fear and free from gender, ability, sexuality, class and identity-based harassment and violence. Our neighbourhoods should provide safe environments for everyone, inside and outside our homes.

Feeling safe within our homes and neighbourhoods is not only important for individual and collective wellbeing but it can also help to establish stronger and longer term communities that feel happy and confident to stay in their local area. Safety can inform the decisions we make about where we move or where we stay, where we want to raise a family, and where we find a job or volunteer in the community. Those living in the most deprived communities are most likely to feel unsafe,[4] highlighting the need for greater investment and support.

In order to feel safe we must acknowledge that crime is a diverse and varied thing and, although problems with gangs, drugs, and knife crime have become a particular issue in recent years, there are also major issues of sexual harassment, assault and other forms of gender, sexuality, class and ability-based violence in public space. Sustrans has published data showing that compared to cisgender and heterosexual people, LGBTQ+ people feel less safe within their neighbourhoods.[5]

How does this affect health and wellbeing?

According to the Glasgow Centre for Population Health the perception people have of their neighbourhood has a clear health impact, with a lack of safe play spaces making it more likely for people to experience anxiety, depression and poor health.[6]

The fear of crime, bullying and 'stranger danger' can prevent parents from encouraging their children to play locally and children from feeling safe when exploring their local neighbourhoods.[7, 8] Additionally, fears over the safety of traffic are one of the main reasons why parents don't feel comfortable with their children exploring their neighbourhoods independently. But children need, and deserve to feel safe in their environment, especially in their local area.[9] There is clear evidence showing that accessible and safe urban green spaces, for example, can influence levels of physical activity and influence individual and community feelings of wellbeing.[10]

4   Public Health England – Written Evidence (BEN0186).
5   LGBTQ+ people feel less safe in their neighbourhoods. How can we change this? Sustrans (2022).
6   Health and the Physical Characteristics of Urban Neighbourhoods: a Critical Literature Review. Glasgow Centre for Population Health (2007).
7   Children's independent mobility: Current knowledge, future directions, and public health implications. Marzi, I., & Reimers, A. K. In International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 2018: 15(11)
8   Children's 20-minute Neighbourhoods: A review of available literature. Sustrans (2023).
9   ibid
10   Health and the Physical Characteristics of Urban Neighbourhoods. Glasgow Centre for Population Health (2007).
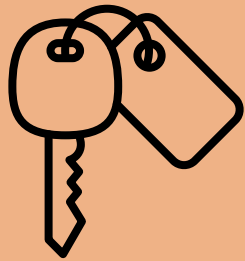
Affordability and permanence

What do we mean when we say affordability and permanence?

Affordability and permanence refers to the cost of living in a neighbourhood and the sense of rootedness we have to where we live, whether we are a homeowner or tenant. This means considering how much rent, bills and mortgages cost, and also the sense of stability that results from knowing we can pay these costs and have a future where we live. Permanency can also be defined by our ability to adapt our homes to changing needs. Adaption can actively support us to live either independently or interdependently, where principles of inclusive design enable us to gain greater control and feel less pressured to move out of established communities.

Feeling secure within our homes is vital to our wellbeing. That means having homes and neighbourhoods that provide affordable, long-term housing with security of tenure. This relates to the quality of housing and to its affordability, security and permanence. These are some of the attractions of home ownership, even though they can be illusory for a mortgage-dependent family struggling to meet their monthly payments. A sense of control can be even more of a challenge in rented housing, particularly in the private rented sector.

Currently, housing presents another challenge in the form of life-long accessibility and adaptability. Homes for people who have mobility issues or that are adapted for older residents are difficult to come by. Homes that are designed to consider how residents will have changing access and mobility needs, through adaptable and considerate design and layout options, can give residents a better sense of security as they get older.

How does this affect health and wellbeing?

Roughly 17.5 million people are impacted by the housing emergency according to Shelter England[11] and 4 million of these people say they are worried about losing or having to leave their homes. This contributes to a nationwide feeling of insecurity.

Some people may also feel trapped where they live; people seek permanence and security in their tenures but also need the opportunity to move when desired or needed. 'Un-elective fixity' refers to the feeling of being 'trapped' in a home or neighbourhood that is inadequate, and this can exacerbate mental ill health.[12]

Fuel poverty, alongside rent arrears and being behind on mortgage payments, can result in circumstances that affect the development and exacerbation of mental ill health, including depression, anxiety and stress.[13] This is particularly true in the case of evictions, legal processes around loans, and wider insecurity of tenure where the likelihood of being asked to move can also make it difficult for people to feel settled in their home.[14]

11   17.5 million people now impacted by the housing emergency. Shelter UK (2021).
12   Exploring the relationship between housing concerns, mental health and wellbeing: a qualitative study of social housing tenants. Holding, E., et al. In Journal of Public Health, 42(3), pp. E231–e238.
13   What does the evidence say about the relationship between housing and mental health? Dillon Newton, Éilish Duke, Clementinah Rooke and Philip Brown (2021).
14   Housing insecurity and mental health: an evidence review. UK Collaborative Centre for Housing Evidence (2019).

Health equity

Our health is crucial to our quality of life. Overcrowding, damp and mould within homes are all detrimental to our health and wellbeing and can affect some communities more than others. The difference in life expectancy between the most and least affluent areas can be almost 20 years, even for adjacent neighbourhoods. Our housing and local environments should equitably support communities to pursue healthy lifestyles, no matter where we live.

The UCL Institute of Health Equity defines health equity as having a fair opportunity to live a long, healthy life. Tackling health inequalities, which are the systematic differences in health between social groups, is key to achieving equity, and the spaces we inhabit can play an important role.[15]

Housing standards

What do we mean when we say housing standards?

Given that we spend the majority of our lives in our homes, it is essential that our homes have a positive impact on our health and wellbeing. This can be achieved through the amount of space, light and ventilation inside a home and the level of comfort it can provide to residents of all ages all year round. Also important is the material quality of the interior spaces and our ability to adapt these to our changing needs as we age.

The quality and impact of housing standards relate to the way a home is designed and the amount and flexibility of space, levels of comfort (neither too hot nor too cold), indoor air quality, sound insulation, ventilation, daylight levels and external space it has. It speaks to the material elements that determine the environmental conditions within a home. There are plenty of ways these elements can be considered in the design and delivery of homes that positively contribute to our health. Some of these are well explored in the Town and Country Planning Association's (TCPA) Healthy Homes Principles. [16]

Providing affordable, good quality housing is a way of addressing the widening health inequality gap and of improving quality of life. There are many positive and negative effects that housing has on mental health, wellbeing and clinical health-related outcomes of children and adults, including amongst vulnerable groups.

How does this affect health and wellbeing?

Positive outcomes arise from housing warmth and energy efficiency, removing home hazards, and adapting existing buildings.[17] Negative outcomes arise through respiratory-related diseases connected to damp and mould, excess indoor cold and indoor air pollution.[18] Cold homes are a serious problem in the UK, with over one-quarter of low-income households being unable to adequately heat their homes.[19] Various studies have shown that the development of mental ill-health is strongly linked with housing quality issues. A range of situations result in housing quality issues, including overcrowding and a lack of space, and exposure to damp, cold and mouldy conditions. Inadequate access to kitchen, bathroom or toilet facilities, unreliable heating and/or a requirement for additional sources of heat during winter, high levels of noise due to poor sound insulation, and general levels of deterioration of the internal and external fabric of dwellings also contribute.[20]

It is important to note that housing problems appear to be closely associated with a lack of choice in the housing market and limited financial resources, both of which may independently affect mental health.[21]

16 Healthy Homes Principles, Town and Country Planning Association (TCPA)
17 The relationship between buildings and health: a systematic review. Ige J, Pilkington P, Orme J, et al. In the Journal of Public Health. 2019;41(2):e121-e132
18 Poor indoor climate: Its impact on health and life satisfaction, as well as its wider socio-economic costs. RAND (2022).
19 Cold homes and mental health harm: Evidence from the UK Household Longitudinal Study. Clair, A, and Emma Baker. In Social Science & Medicine 314 (2022)
20 What does the evidence say about the relationship between housing and mental health? Dillon Newton, Éilish Duke, Clementinah Rooke and Philip Brown (2021).
21 The impact of persistent poor housing conditions on mental health: A longitudinal population-based study. Pevalin, David J., et al. In Preventive medicine 105 (2017): 304-310.
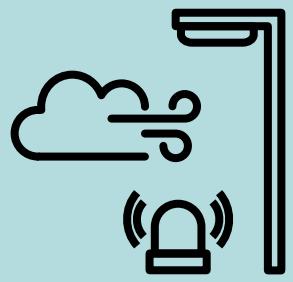
Air, noise and light

What do we mean when we say air, noise and light?

The environmental quality of our neighbourhoods is important as proximity to areas of poorer air, noise and light quality are associated with greater deprivation. Our neighbourhoods should provide environments that are clean and reduce all kinds of pollution. This includes how clean air, quiet neighbourhoods and how much artificial light is present at night.

Poor air quality, both outdoors and indoors, is the largest environmental risk to public health in the UK and therefore to our quality of life.22 Other pollutants such as light and sound pollution play an increasing role in the way our homes and neighbourhoods affect our mental and physical health and overall wellbeing. Proximity to areas of poorer air, noise and light quality are associated with greater deprivation, therefore creating healthier, less polluted communities is both an environmental, social and economical challenge.

How does this affect health and wellbeing?

Poor air quality has a big impact on public health, resulting in up to 36,000 deaths per year in the UK, with the largest source of this pollution coming from vehicle emissions.[22] The impact of noise pollution on human health is also increasingly being linked to negative outcomes including cardiovascular disorders and chronic sleep disorders.[23] Among older adults and children, noise pollution has also been associated with worse mental health outcomes,[24] in addition to being linked to higher anxiety levels among adults.[25] Access to quiet green spaces is a good antidote to noise pollution, with studies showing that covering sources of noise either acoustically or visually minimises its effect on people.[26]

Furthermore, lack of access to daylight internally has a number of negative health impacts that adversely affect an array of mental and physical variables from sleep and cognition to vision and mental health.[27] Studies draw particular attention to the ways in which light can trigger and affect circadian rhythms, which regulate essential bodily functions such as sleep and appetite.[28] The increased adoption of artificial lighting, particularly LEDs, has been associated with over-lighting and is a possible cause for disturbance in the form of light pollution.[29]

22 20-Minute Neighbourhoods: Creating Healthier, Active, Prosperous Communities An Introduction for Council Planners in England. Town and Country Planning Association (2021).
23 The neglected pollutants: the effects of artificial light and noise on human health. House of Lords. (2023)
24 Environmental influences on healthy and active ageing: A systematic review. Annear, M., et al. In Ageing & Society, 34 (4), 590-622.
25 A systematic review of the evidence on the effect of the built and physical environment on mental health. Clark, C., Myron, R., Stansfeld, S., & Candy, B. In Journal of Public Mental Health [online]. 6 (2), 14- 27.
26 Associations and effect modification between transportation noise, self-reported response to noise and the wider determinants of health: A narrative synthesis of the literature. Peris, E., & Fenech, B. In Science of the Total Environment, 748, 141040.
27 Poor indoor climate: Its impact on health and life satisfaction, as well as its wider socio-economic costs. RAND (2022)
28 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/445583/gs-15-11-future-ageing-homes-neighbourhoods-er21.pdf
29 The neglected pollutants: the effects of artificial light and noise on human health. House of Lords. (2023)
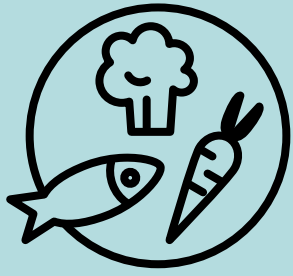
Healthy food choices

What do we mean when we say healthy food choices?

Having access to affordable, healthy food options locally is a big part of happy and healthy neighbourhoods. This means not only the availability of fresh and healthy produce, whether that is through local shops or grocery stores, but also the ability for communities to grow their own food if they want to. Conversely, the proliferation of fast food outlets serving only unhealthy food can exacerbate unhealthy lifestyles, particularly among young people.

Access to healthier food options, whether through access to fresh groceries and produce or the availability of locally grown food, is usually limited by affordability. Often these options are limited for those who are in the least well off parts of the UK; the poorest fifth of the UK's households would need to spend 43% of their disposable income on food to meet the cost of the Government-recommended diet,[30] which exacerbates health inequalities. At the same time, the density of fast food outlets increases in England, as almost one in five local authorities has seen an increase in proportion of fast-food outlets,[31] providing cheap, easily accessible but nutrient poor food options.

Communities should be empowered to grow food locally, if they want to. Research points to gardening and food growing as a means of promoting relief from acute stress and reducing levels of perceived stress.[32] Local growing initiatives can, therefore, be a good opportunity to build connections and a sense of community at the same time as addressing a lack of healthy food options.

How does this affect health and wellbeing?

Scarcity has an effect on people's long term decision making, causing people to make decisions that adversely affect them in the long run.[33] This is because people who are experiencing adversity are more likely to make short term decisions to cope.[34] At an earlier developmental stage, access to healthy food options is essential to ensure that children are able to get all the nutrients they need to grow. In the most deprived areas, there is a higher prevalence of tooth decay (2.5 times) among five year olds compared to those in the least deprived areas.[35] Children aged 10 and 11 in the most deprived 10th of the population are on average 1.3 cm shorter than those who are in the least deprived 10th of the population.[36]

Young people have also felt encouraged to eat unhealthy, cheap and on-the-go foods due to having little money. Often, young people socialise at fast food restaurants, which in turn influences their food choices.[37]

Research has shown a positive correlation between food-growing activities and the increase in consumption of fruits and vegetables for adults and have net positive impacts on nutrition and approaches towards healthy eating for school-aged children.[38]

30   The Broken Plate 2023: The State of the Nation's Food System, The Food Foundation (2023)
31   ibid
32   Gardening and food growing to reduce stress and stress related illness. Growing Health
33   Psychosocial pathways and health outcomes: Informing action on health inequalities. Bell, Ruth. The Institute of Health Equity (2017).
34   Health Equity in England: The Marmot Review 10 Years On. Institute of Health Equity. Marmot M, Allen J, Boyce T, Goldblatt P, Morrison J. Institute of Health Equity (2020)
35   ibid
36   ibid
37   The interplay between social and food environments on UK adolescents' food choices: implications for policy. Shaw, S. et al. In Health promotion international 38, no. 4 (2023)
38   Gardening and food growing to reduce stress and stress related illness. Growing Health
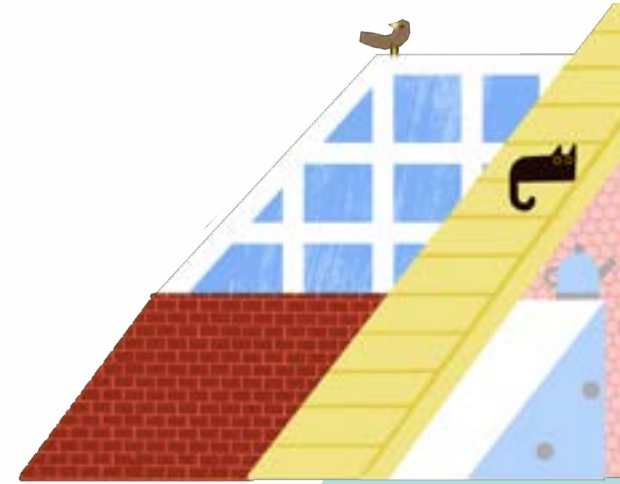
Connection to nature

Many studies have shown that contact with nature is good for our mood and aids our recovery when we are ill, whether through interaction with our window boxes, local parks or countryside. Everyone from all parts of society should have better access to nature within their area, taking an active part in exploring and looking after it. We need homes in which to live, but their creation and care inevitably impact the natural environment, so in return we must respect the environment during construction of our homes and neighbourhoods, particularly given the dual threats of climate change and biodiversity loss. The good news is that, by and large, a neighbourhood that is healthier for people will be healthier for the planet, too.
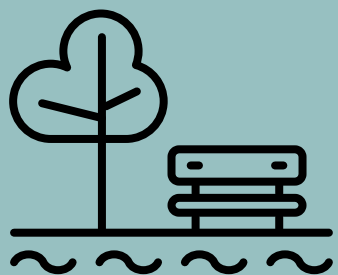
Green and blue spaces

What do we mean by green and blue spaces?

Green and blue spaces are natural and semi-natural areas, which includes local pocket parks, wild groves and meadows as well as ponds, canals, lakes and coastlines. Our neighbourhoods should provide everyone with access to a variety of different green and blues spaces, allowing us to feel more connected to nature in our everyday lives and leaving space for wildlife, too. Green and blue spaces also provide opportunities for social contacts and help to improve community cohesion.

Most of the country is covered in green space. More than 90% of the UK consists of pasture, arable land, forests, moors, wetland, natural spaces and the green spaces within our towns and cities.[39] This green space can be brought into neighbourhoods as green corridors along river valleys, canals and former railway lines. It can form a network linking natural spaces within urban areas along with parks and formal green spaces such as school grounds, sports pitches and cemeteries.

For disabled people and older adults, the design of green spaces is as important as being in close proximity to them. Structural barriers in the design of street furniture, provision of amenities and the accessibility of wayfinding (the use of colour, signage and other design elements to help people find their way around) can all contribute to exclusion,[40] therefore the design of green and blue spaces must be considered with these communities in mind.

How does this affect health and wellbeing?

Access to, and engagement with, green and blue spaces is widely associated with positive health outcomes, such as improved physical and mental health, reduced risk of cardiovascular disease, risk of mortality and other chronic conditions.[41] Green and blue spaces also provide opportunities for social contacts and help to improve community cohesion. Research shows that opportunities to engage with nature, conduct physical activity and interact with our wider community, all of which contribute to our wellbeing, are influenced by the safety and accessibility of urban greenspaces.[42]

Further evidence shows that people experience less mental distress, anxiety and depression, improved wellbeing and productivity levels, and reduced stress levels when living in urban areas with greater levels of green space.[43] For physical activity, running in a park is associated with a more restorative experience when compared to the same exercise in an urban environment.[44] Community health can also be improved through access to green spaces.[45] Social interactions promoted through areas in the urban environment such as gardens, parks, allotments, green paths and other areas of public use with grass, provide essential meeting and gathering points.[46] And linked to this are the clear economic benefits of creating employment, hosting economic activities (such as cafés or events) and encouraging inward investment.[47]

Much like green spaces, there are positive associations of blue space with mental health, improved social interaction, increased physical activity and stress reduction.[48] It is important to note that the presence of urban green or blue space is not enough to secure the desired health outcomes. Important elements that need to be considered are maintenance, access, perceived security aspects, cultural and socio-economic barriers.[49]

39   Land use statistics: England 2021 - statistical release (2023)
40   I Would Really like to Visit the Forest, but it is Just Too Difficult: A Qualitative Study on Mobility Disability and Green Spaces. Corazon, S, et al. In Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research 21, no. 1 (2019).
41   Spatial Planning for Health: An evidence resource for planning and designing healthier places (2017)
42   Health and the Physical Characteristics of Urban Neighbourhoods: a Critical Literature Review. Glasgow Centre for Population Health (2007)
43   Mental Health And Town Planning Building In Resilience. Royal Town Planning Institute (2020)
44   Evidence on health benefits of urban green spaces. World Health Organisation Regional Office for Europe. In Urban green spaces and health: A review of evidence. pp. 3-20. (2016)
45   Evidence on health benefits of urban green spaces. World Health Organisation Regional Office for Europe. In Urban green spaces and health: A review of evidence. pp. 3-20. (2016)
46   Linking public urban green spaces and human well-being: A systematic review. Reyes-Riveros, R. et al. In Urban Forestry & Urban Greening 61 (2021): 127105.
47   Space to thrive: A rapid evidence review of the benefits of parks and green spaces for people and communities. Sheffield Hallam University (2019)
48   Types and characteristics of urban and peri-urban green spaces having an impact on human mental health and wellbeing: a systematic review. Beute, F, et al. EKLIPSE Expert Working Group. UK Centre for Ecology & Hydrology (2020)
49   Association between urban greenspace and health: a systematic review of literature. Gianfredi, V, et al. In International journal of environmental research and public health 18, no. 10 (2021): 5137.
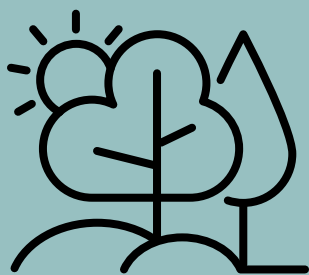
Biodiversity

What do we mean when we say biodiversity?

Biodiversity refers to the quality of the green and blue spaces around our homes and neighbourhoods, and the variety of wildlife they encourage. Climate change is a primary driver of biodiversity loss, so we must recognise the importance of providing environments where wildlife can thrive alongside residents and communities.

Water and soil are a key concern for health and the health equity of sustainable communities. This acknowledgement culminated in the government passing the biodiversity net gain (BNG) requirement under the Town and Country Planning Act in late 2023. BNG provides not only a strategy but also a requirement for creating and improving natural habitats by ensuring that a development has demonstrated a measurable positive impact of 10% on biodiversity compared to its pre-development state.[50]

Some research on England's biodiversity and its role in climate mitigation[51] has concluded that the current condition of protected areas in England provides insufficient and inadequate safeguarding against species and habitat loss. The lack of protections and insufficient management of England's high conservation areas place a high proportion of the carbon storage that these habitats facilitate at risk. This suggests that improvements would not benefit biodiversity but improve climate change mitigation.[52]

How does this affect health and wellbeing?

The inevitable interaction between humans and nature means that in order for biodiversity to thrive people need to interact with and protect natural spaces. Successful stewardship, engagement and maintenance models for natural spaces have the additional benefit of involving people and creating a sense of community. Benefits also include the likes of planning for healthy walkable environments and offering opportunities to improve biodiversity through improved street connectivity, which in turn better connects flora and fauna across landscapes.[53] Promoting the ecological complexity and robustness of biodiversity through improved management practices represents a resource with the ability to improve human health.[54]

Biophilic design aims to foster the connections between humans and nature, including with principles such as the use of natural materials and the provision of daylight. Research supports the benefits of biophilic design elements for people's health and wellbeing, for example by lowering levels of stress and cortisol (which directly impact stress levels) for those in natural spaces.[55] Other benefits include decreasing the urban heat island effect through shading and improving air quality through creating natural barriers and trapping road pollutants.[56] There are also mental health benefits to biodiversity, and therapeutic effects have been reported from listening to birdsong or sounds of flowing water.[57] There is also increasing evidence revealing the influence of smell on multiple human wellbeing factors, often via a strong link to memory and through environmental factors such as experiencing woodland scents.[58]
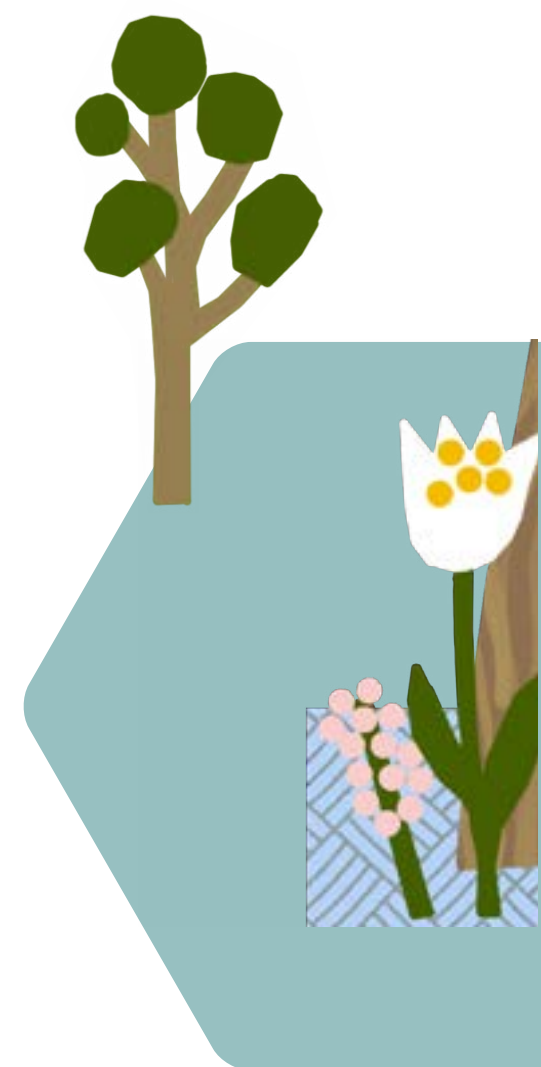
50 Biodiversity net gain.Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (2023)
51 Making space for nature: A review of England's wildlife sites and ecological networks. Lawton J. Defra (2010).
52 The value of habitats of conservation importance to climate change mitigation in the UK. Field, R. H., et al. In Biological Conservation 248 (2020)
53 Urban Biodiversity as Strategy for Walkability (breakout presentation). Brierley, Meaghan, and Polly Cockett. In Journal of Transport & Health 7 (2017): S28-S29.
54 Soil biodiversity and human health. Wall, Diana H., Uffe N. Nielsen, and Johan Six. In Nature 528, no. 7580 (2015): 69-76.
55 Nature connectedness and biophilic design. Richardson, Miles, and Carly W. Butler. In Building Research & Information 50, no. 1-2 (2022): 36-42.
56 Biophilic design in architecture and its contributions to health, well-being, and sustainability: A critical review. Zhong, Weijie, Torsten Schröder, and Juliette Bekkering. In Frontiers of Architectural Research 11, no. 1 (2022): 114-141.
57 Research finds nature sounds 'benefit mental health'. BBC (2022)
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Climate resilience and adaptation

What do we mean when we say climate resilience and adaptation?

Because of climate change, our homes and neighbourhoods are increasingly vulnerable to extreme weather events, such as flooding or heatwaves. The places where we live therefore must be designed and delivered to be climate resilient and to minimise their impact on the natural environment in the long term. To mitigate climate change, our homes and neighbourhoods should provide us with the opportunity to live more sustainable and environmentally friendly lifestyles with ease.

The impact that our buildings, and in particular our homes, have on the environment is an important factor to consider. This includes energy efficiency and carbon emissions associated with the use of the building, along with the energy used in construction, toxic materials and measures to reduce water use and recycle waste. These are vital for the health of the planet, which of course will impact everyone's quality of life.

Communities have the potential to lead on climate action locally, bringing together residents to address mitigation and adaptation challenges.[59] In addition to communities leading on recycling, composting and other local forms of mitigation, wider greening and more strategic, urban-scale climate change mitigation and adaptation steps must be led by government and councils.

How does this affect health and wellbeing?

Decisions taken at a neighbourhood scale, like the amount of green space, influence the community's potential responses and resilience to climate shocks and stresses.[60] In addition, group identity and a sense of belonging within a community and neighbourhood, have been evidenced to encourage participation in neighbourhood-based collective action around climate change.[61]

An often overlooked quality defining our wellbeing is our relationship with land and local built heritage. Climate change threatens the conservation of our built heritage and could lead to accelerated degradation or loss of cultural heritage[62] via climate-related hazards that put communities at risk.

Nature-based solutions are a key method for adapting to the impacts of climate change, whilst protecting and enhancing biodiversity, and acting as carbon sinks in some circumstances.[63] Nature-based solutions can take many forms including green roofs and other forms of greening such as street trees for carbon sequestration. Natural forms of shading and cooling of buildings can lead to less energy needed for cooling and heating buildings.[64] In addition, energy efficiency measures, if used correctly and equitably, can help reduce emissions and energy bills, improve health and wellbeing, and help tackle fuel poverty.[65]

The UK has some of the oldest housing stock in the world with one fifth being built pre-1919. Since this housing stock represents 80% of the homes needed for 2050,[66] retrofitting presents one of the most cost-effective ways to reduce energy consumption and carbon production. The Global Centre on Healthcare and Urbanisation says that "Modelling suggests that using efficiency measures to achieve a 25% reduction in energy use by 2035 would save households an annual average of £270 and create over 60,000 new jobs. There may also be tangible benefits to occupant health: the NHS could save an estimated 42p for every £1 spent on effectively retrofitting fuel poor home".[67]

59 What does neighbourhood climate action look like? A scoping literature review. Joshi, Neelakshi, Sandeep Agrawal, and Shirley Lie. In Climate Action 1, no. 1 (2022): 1-13.

60 Evaluating the resilience of sustainable neighborhoods by exposing LEED neighborhoods to future risks. Uda, Mariko, and Christopher Kennedy. In Journal of Infrastructure Systems 24, no. 4 (2018): 04018030.

61 Climate protection needs societal change: Determinants of intention to participate in collective climate action. Rees, Jonas H., and Sebastian Bamberg. In European Journal of Social Psychology 44, no. 5 (2014): 466-473.

62 Towards sustainable historic cities: mitigation climate change risks. Gandini, A, Leire Garmendia, and Rosa San Mateos. In Entrepreneurship and Sustainability Issues 4, no. 3 (2017): 319.

63 The Value of Nature Based Solutions. UKGBC (2022)

64 ibid

65 UK housing: Fit for the future?. Committee on Climate Change (2019)

66 Building Towards Net Zero Carbon Homes. Global Centre on Healthcare and Urbanisation (2022)

67 ibid

A sense of wonder

Happiness, fun and wonder play an important role in our quality of life. The physical expression of this is seen in the design of our homes and neighbourhoods – not simply the way they function, but also the way they look and how they feel. In addition, having the ability to be creative and taking part in cultural expression gives us all an opportunity to feel a sense of identity and pride in our community and to open ourselves to a diverse range of cultures in turn. Importantly, play is also crucial to our health and wellbeing at any age, and having opportunities to play and pursue leisure and sporting activities is key to our physical and mental health.
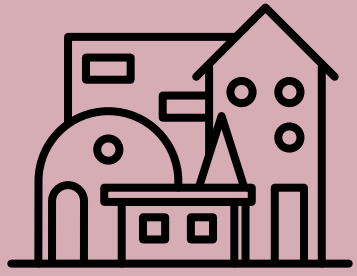
Distinctive design

What do we mean when we say distinctive design?

Our homes and neighbourhoods should be designed with care and attention to not only be useful and long lasting but also to inspire and delight. This means buildings that are beautiful and streets and parks that are human-scaled, visually varied and loved by residents for their character and design. Neighbourhoods can often have historical or heritage sites that are culturally significant, which may include landmarks, museums and buildings that contribute to the story about the community's past and present.

Distinctive design refers to human-scale environments that are varied, diverse and full of character. Conversations around aesthetics and distinctive design need to consider cultural, political and historical contexts that may have informed existing styles and aesthetic tendencies in an area. They should also hold space for more nuanced and varied designs, aesthetics and ways of living to come forward.

How does this affect health and wellbeing?

A recent review of the literature determined that well-designed places have a memorable sense of place characterised by design features that go well beyond appearance.[68] Research in the field of neuroaesthetics has shown that peoples' emotions are directly affected by qualities of architectural interiors that relate to judgements about issues such as coherence, informational richness and homeliness.[69] Other research points to the positive benefits of living in scenic environments, even in areas of relative deprivation.[70] However, there is no robust evidence linking any specific architectural style to better or worse health outcomes.[71]

68   Design value at the neighbourhood scale What does it mean and how do we measure it?. Bilge, S. et al. UK Collaborative Centre for Housing Evidence (2018)
69   Psychological and Neural Responses to Architectural Interiors. Coburn, A. et al. In Cortex, 126, pp. 217-241.
70   Quantifying the Impact of Scenic Environments on Health. Seresinhe, C., Preis, T. & Moat, H. In Sci Rep 5, 16899 (2015)
71   Place value: place quality and its impact on health, social, economic and environmental outcomes. Carmona, M. In Journal of Urban Design, 24(1), (2018) pp. 1-48.35
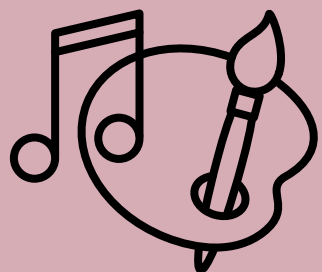
Culture

What do we mean when we say culture?

In a neighbourhood, culture can refer to cultural Institutions, such as concert halls and libraries, and it can express itself in music and street art and in the shared values, beliefs, practices, traditions and social behaviours that characterise the community. Cultural events and celebrations, and local culinary traditions, all provide opportunities for residents to come together, share their heritage, and show pride in their community.

Access to different kinds of arts and culture, formal or otherwise, is a vital part in continuing to make engaged and active communities.[72] Arts and cultural activities can play an important role in engaging and inspiring local communities to get more involved in activities and initiatives locally, for example volunteering their time, expertise and energy to support others.[73]

Art and culture can broaden people's experiences and enable them to think about other people, in a potentially more neutral and more engaged environment than would be produced by conventional political dialogue. We believe in empowerment that can be deployed to give particular groups and individuals the capacity and/or resources to make their own decisions about their neighbourhoods. This capacity building enables communities to use existing community assets such as local culture to address local needs.[74]

How does this affect health and wellbeing?

Evidence demonstrates the valuable contribution of arts and culture to supporting public health objectives, including positive health promotion to prevent periods of ill health and creating healthy communities through a place-based approach.[75] Communities and neighbourhoods that have a strong sense of place, created by a rich mix of culture and access to it, are argued to encourage a long-term commitment and engagement from residents.[76] Recognition of a place's culture, history and heritage help to foster a sense of place,[77] and access to historic places with events and activities can help create collective empowerment for local people.[78]

The social value of culture and access to cultural spaces is acknowledged through 'arts on prescription' programmes, which enable GPs to refer people to museums and other cultural spaces to improve their wellbeing.[79] This process is a form of social prescribing in which health or social care practitioners refer people to a service or a source of support, such as a voluntary group or arts and culture activity. Research has shown that social prescribing can address various social inequalities that impact our physical and mental health such as isolation, loneliness and unemployment.[80] This can specifically help disadvantaged communities and aid in addressing the social determinants of health.[81] Frequent participation with the arts and cultural spaces/events has been shown to improve mental health or lower mental distress across all demographics,[82] and evidence has found that healthy ageing can be improved by participation with arts for mental, emotional and physical health for all ages.[83]

72   Review refresh: Places, spaces, and social connections. What Works Wellbeing (2023)
73   Interpreting patterns of interaction between civic activism and government agency in civic crowdfunding campaigns. Gullino, S. et al. In Built Environment, vol. 45, no. 2, pp. 248-267
74   Health Equity in England: The Marmot Review 10 Years On. Institute of Health Equity. Marmot M, Allen J, Boyce T, Goldblatt P, Morrison J. Institute of Health Equity (2020)
75   Arts and Placeshaping: Evidence Review. Wavehill (2020)
76   Cities as sustainable ecosystems: principles and practices. Newman, P, and Isabella Jennings. Island press, (2012)
77   Cities as sustainable ecosystems: principles and practices. Newman, P, and Isabella Jennings. Island press, (2012)
78   Understanding Thriving Communities. What Works Wellbeing (2021)
79   The social value of place-based arts and culture: rapid review and synthesis. What Works Wellbeing (2022)
80   ibid
81   ibid
82   The Impact of Arts and Cultural Engagement on Population Health: Findings from Major Cohort Studies in the UK and USA 2017 – 2022. Fancourt D et al. London (2023)
83   Creative and Cultural Activities and Wellbeing in Later Life. Age UK (2018)
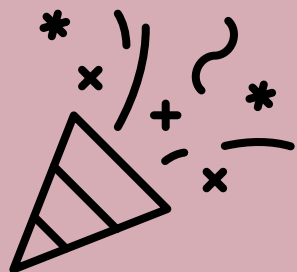
Play and recreation

What do we mean when we say play and recreation?

We all need places to unwind and play and to connect with our friends and neighbours. Play and recreation refers to the opportunities for residents of all ages to be able to connect with themselves and with one another, whether that is using a swing or slide, playing a sport, going to a cinema, chatting over a drink or taking a walk in the countryside. Conserving these opportunities is essential to both physical and mental health and wellbeing.

Finding joy in the everyday adds to the sense of wonder that can help communities feel more connected to one another, stimulating a sense of vitality that can have wider net positive impacts on health and wellbeing. People of all ages should have access to a variety of options when it comes to choosing how they spend their leisure time.

How does this affect health and wellbeing?

Safe and stimulating play is essential for children and young people's mental and physical health.[84] It is not just an activity confined to playgrounds and play areas, but it can happen in all aspects of a child's life in a wide variety of locations and environments. Accessing opportunities for play, and being able to be independent within their neighbourhood, is important for children and young people's wellbeing and development.[85]

There is a lot of evidence that sport and physical activity contributes to enjoyment, happiness and life satisfaction, and social interaction as part of recreation is central to this.[86] Self-esteem and confidence can increase through the opportunity to develop new skills and relationships.[87] There is the potential to reduce anxiety and depression symptoms.[88]

There is evidence that alternative or temporary changes to the way that people interact with a space, such as the closure of streets for children to play, public art installations and a 'pop-up park', can boost social cohesion and social capital (which refers to the network of connections and relationships that people have with others that allow them to function as part of society).[89] There is also evidence that the alternative use of spaces can have a positive impact on civic participation and reduce crime[90] or the fear of crime, and it can also have positive impacts on physical activity and mental wellbeing.[91] Conserving opportunities for play and recreation is essential to both physical and mental health and wellbeing.

Due to playgrounds being outdated or neglected, they often do not meet the standards of children with disabilities.[92] Ensuring that play spaces for all ages are inclusive and accessible avoids excluding disabled people and gives them the same opportunities to interact with others.

84 Draft London Plan. Greater London Authority. (2017)
85 The London Plan: The spatial development strategy for Greater London. Greater London Authority (2021)
86 Review of Evidence on the Outcomes of Sport and Physical Activity. Sport England (2017)
87 ibid
88 ibid
89 Review refresh: Places, spaces, and social connections. What Works Wellbeing (2023)
90 ibid
91 ibid
92 Children's Usage of Inclusive Playgrounds: A Naturalistic Observation Study of Play. Maeghan E, et al. In International journal of environmental research and public health 19, no. 20 (2022): 13648.

Getting around

Having access to a car can contribute to people's quality of life, but when everyone owns a car roads become noisy and unsafe and parked cars often clog our streets and pavements. There are significant health and wellbeing benefits to walking, wheeling and cycling, and public transport is crucial in maintaining equitable and resilient neighbourhoods. It is essential that we can choose how to get around, based on needs, accessibility and affordability. This means having the infrastructure to get around using different options – by walking, cycling, using public transport or car shares, for example – and having equitable access to a range of transport options.
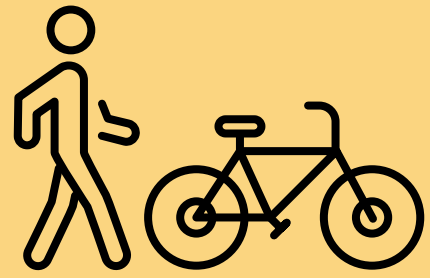
Walking, wheeling and cycling

What do we mean when we say walking, wheeling and cycling?

A healthy neighbourhood is one that we can safely navigate by walking, cycling or wheeling (which includes activities such as rollerblading, skateboarding and using a wheelchair or mobility scooter). This relates to the infrastructure provided, the design of streets and the extent to which the space encourages and facilitates residents' movement, allowing for connectivity between key spaces such as schools, local amenities and public transport. Our neighbourhoods should provide attractive, usable and safe walking, wheeling and cycling routes for all.

Encouraging different modes of transport within and around neighbourhoods is an important part of creating safer, healthier and cleaner neighbourhoods. Often, improving the accessibility of streets through investment in walking, wheeling and cycling improvements has a number of secondary benefits that dramatically improve quality of life.[93]

How does this affect health and wellbeing?

Multiple studies have highlighted the positive impact of 'walkable' neighbourhoods on people's levels of physical activity and, consequently, on their health[94, 95, 96]. People who walk or cycle to work have a reduced risk of early death or illness than those who commute by car.[97] Importantly, the estimated benefits of the increased physical activity caused by shifting to an active mode of travel – walking or cycling – greatly outweigh the detrimental effects of traffic incidents or exposure to air pollution.[98]

These positive health impacts can be enhanced further by well-designed infrastructure, as people walking, wheeling or cycling are generally exposed to lower concentrations of air pollution when using routes that are separated from motorised traffic.[99]

It is important to remember, however, that an individual's health can also impact their transport choices. People with mobility issues are more likely to experience negative transport impacts, as more active modes of travel may not be suitable.[100] This means that having a variety of accessible, affordable transport options is essential.

We should design neighbourhoods to encourage more people to walk, wheel and cycle for local trips, whilst recognising that these options won't always be suitable for everyone. Much can be achieved by tipping the balance, making the car slightly less convenient and walking, wheeling and cycling slightly easier.

93 Spatial Planning for Health: An evidence resource for planning and designing healthier places (2017)
94 Walkability and Mixed-Use Making valuable and healthy communities. The King's Foundation (2020)
95 Systematic literature review of built environment effects on physical activity and active transport – an update and new findings on health equity. Smith M, et al. In Int J Behav Nutr Phys Act 14, 158 (2017)
96 The environmental, social, and economic benefits of sustainable travel to local high streets and town centres. Climate X Change (2023)
97 20-Minute Neighbourhoods: Creating Healthier, Active, Prosperous Communities An Introduction for Council Planners in England. Town and Country Planning Association (2021)
98 Health impact assessment of active transportation: A systematic review. Mueller, N, et al. In Preventive medicine 76 (2015): 103-114.
99 Assessing the exposure to air pollution during transport in urban areas–Evidence review. Mitsakou, C, et al. In Journal of Transport & Health, 21, 101064. (2021)
100 Transport, health, and wellbeing: An evidence review for the Department for Transport. Cooper, E, et al. (2019)
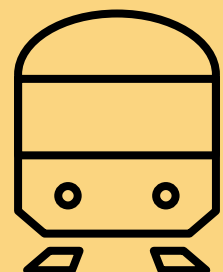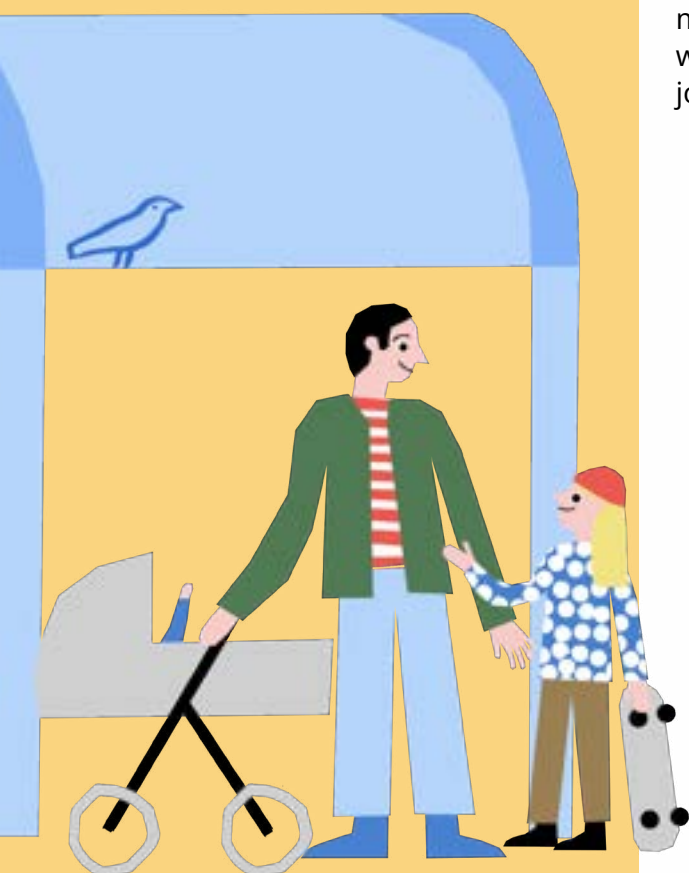
Public transport

What do we mean when we say public transport?

Access to affordable, reliable and inclusive public transport is crucial in ensuring freedom of movement for all, particularly those who don't have access to their own vehicle. Good public transport can provide easy access to education, services and employment, and be better for the planet. We should have access to affordable and reliable public transport in our neighbourhoods, allowing us to get around with ease, whether that is to travel to work, travel with children or to meet friends or family.

Public transport is important both for social equity and for the environment. Those of us who live in cities might take it for granted, but for many places the quality of public transport is poor and getting worse. This is crucial to the millions of people who don't have access to a car and for whom public transport is a lifeline, enabling access to jobs, services and friends.

How does this affect health and wellbeing?

Evidence shows that the availability of public transport affects people's mental health and wellbeing, particularly in relation to social connectedness. Effective transport provision, including reliable bus links, can help facilitate social interactions and promote social inclusion, while the withdrawal of such services is shown to reduce social networks and social relationships.[101]

Interventions such as targeted bus services to improve access to healthcare have been found to be effective in improving health outcomes.[102] Evidence also suggests that combining public transport provision with forms of active travel (e.g. walking to a bus stop) can improve cardiovascular fitness, and providing good quality public transport is associated with more active travel among children.[103]

The provision of affordable, accessible public transport therefore has an important role to play in improving and maintaining people's health and wellbeing.

101 Transport, health, and wellbeing: An evidence review for the Department for Transport. Cooper, E, et al. (2019)
102 ibid
103 Spatial Planning for Health: An evidence resource for planning and designing healthier places (2017)
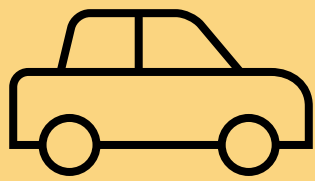
Cars

What do we mean when we say cars?

For many people, cars have become an integral part of everyday life. However, reducing our reliance on them is critical to lower carbon emissions and air pollution. Over-reliance on cars also affects streets and neighbourhoods, taking up space that could be used for play or nature. Our neighbourhoods should enable us to use our cars less often, providing attractive, affordable and safe alternatives for getting around.

Having access to a car may be good for our quality of life, particularly where public transport is lacking. But for large swathes of the population, driving less would be beneficial for health and wellbeing. Providing alternatives to car use is important. Doing so can help to reduce both levels of private car ownership and the amount that cars are used.

How does this affect health and wellbeing?

Evidence shows that there is a direct relationship between physical health and the modes of transport people use.[104] While cars can have a positive impact on physical health when they provide access to healthy food suppliers and leisure activities, for most people they are more likely to reduce physical activity and so have a negative impact.[105]

Another effect of high car ownership is an associated high level of pavement parking. These parking practices can create barriers to people choosing alternative forms of transport; a survey of disabled people across the UK found that 73% of people would find prohibiting vehicles parking on pavements useful for them to walk or wheel more[106], with all the positive health impacts that brings.

As we develop homes and neighbourhoods, we must also remember that not everyone has access to a car, which makes creating car dependency a social justice issue. Lowest income households have higher levels of non-car ownership – 40% have no car access – and this can impact people's access to jobs and training opportunities.[107] Because female heads of household, younger and older people, ethnic minorities and disabled people are concentrated in this group,[108] building neighbourhoods that require people to own a car to get around is an intersectional issue that can disproportionately impact the wellbeing of people already at risk of being marginalised.
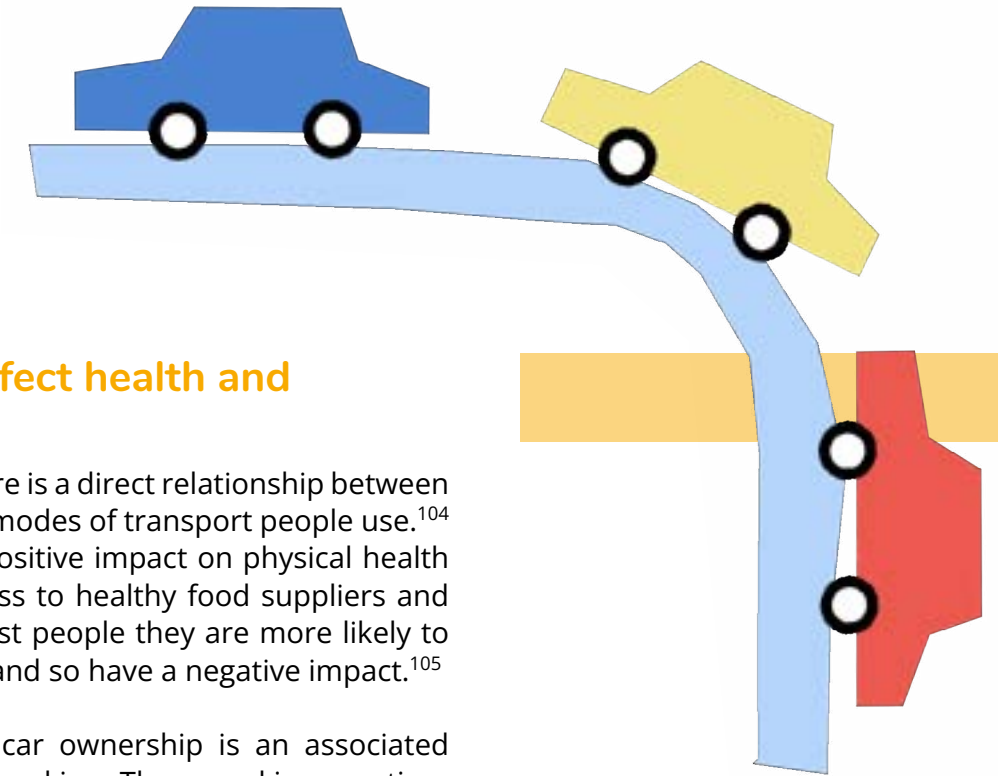
104   Transport, health, and wellbeing: An evidence review for the Department for Transport. Cooper, E, et al. (2019)
105   ibid
106   Disabled Citizens' Inquiry Giving disabled people a voice in walking and wheeling policy and practice. Sustrans (2023)
107   Inequalities in Mobility and Access in the UK Transport System. Lucas, K, et al. Future of Mobility: Evidence Review, Government Office for Science (2019)
108   ibid

Connected communities

Belonging to a community is crucial to our personal, social and psychological wellbeing. Our local communities can provide a shared sense of identity, connection and purpose, and they can encourage the celebration of diversity, collective action and the sharing of resources across differing cultures and languages. Together, we can get to know our neighbours, chat to shopkeepers or just share a nod with fellow dog walkers. To facilitate this, local spaces need to enable a variety of social connections to emerge, while providing local job opportunities and a range of social services.
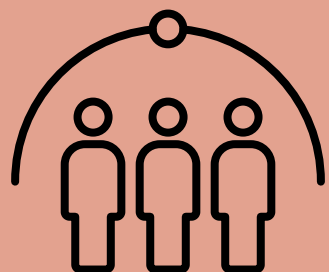
Belonging

What do we mean when we say belonging?

Belonging refers to how connected we feel to our local communities and is a key way of combating loneliness, with its consequent health and wellbeing risks. A sense of belonging could come in the form of joining community events or a local social media group, or it could simply be about knowing our neighbours and saying hello. Neighbourhoods should provide opportunities for people to connect with each other to allow a sense of belonging to emerge.

The notion of belonging ties into feelings of social connectedness. More specifically, it ties into how connected people feel on a personal level to their neighbourhood and community. It is important to allow all members of a community to feel a connection to their community, regardless of background. Access to a variety of different perspectives, be they cultural or otherwise, is an essential part in helping to foster strong ties between people and within their communities, and we believe that diversity is a big part of creating happy and healthy neighbourhoods.

How does this affect health and wellbeing?

Community events can particularly enhance a sense of belonging or pride through celebration of a shared identity, collective empowerment, civic participation and knowledge and cultural exchange.[109] Such events are an essential part of tackling issues of social isolation and loneliness, which has been shown to lead to social isolation and worse health outcomes.[110] More specifically, isolation and loneliness are connected to a wider range of negative health outcomes, including but not limited to depression, anxiety, dementia, coronary heart disease, cancer and an overall increased susceptibility to infectious disease.[111] Additionally, volunteering has been shown to have a strong association with better health outcomes, for example lower mortality, better functioning, life satisfaction and a decrease in depression.[112, 113] Diversity within communities is also an important factor, particularly as communities that are mixed across different ages, ethnicities, disabilities and tenure can help prevent stigmatisation and isolation.[114]

109   Review refresh: Places, spaces, and social connections. What Works Wellbeing (2023)
110   Psychosocial pathways and health outcomes: Informing action on health inequalities. Bell, R. Public Health England and Institute of Health Equity, (2017)
111   Loneliness and social isolation causal association with health-related lifestyle risk in older adults: a systematic review and meta-analysis protocol. Malcolm, M, et all. In Systematic reviews 8 (2019): 1-8.
112   Is volunteering a public health intervention? A systematic review and meta-analysis of the health and survival of volunteers. Jenkinson, E, et al. In BMC public health 13 (2013): 1-10.
113   Benefits of formal voluntary work among older people. A review. Von Bonsdorff, Mikaela B., and Taina Rantanen. In Aging clinical and experimental research 23 (2011): 162-169.
114   Design for All; A place to call home. Fraser M, et al. University College London, (2023)

Local businesses and jobs

What do we mean when we say local businesses and jobs?

Local businesses and jobs are the life-blood of neighbourhoods, providing activity and vitality. As well as a means for living and working, they create a range of economic opportunities, whether through spending, investment or generating income. Our neighbourhoods should provide a mixture of uses that are well-integrated, thoughtfully designed and contribute to the local economy.

Access to physical spaces that support the economic needs of a community is an important ingredient to a thriving and healthy community and contributes to the growth of new social connections. It is, therefore, essential to consider the long-term needs of a community by building in flexibility into the provision of non-residential uses locally.

This specifically includes the consideration of an appropriate mix of shops, cafés, restaurants, pubs, offices and working spaces and can be achieved through the co-location of these uses; placing different uses into a single building, for example. Bringing these uses together can use land more efficiently and encourage community cohesion by facilitating moments for community groups to come together[115] and increasing opportunities for chance encounters, which positively impact social cohesion.[116] Furthermore, developments that prioritise access to a variety of land uses can increase physical activity among all age groups.[117]

We believe that clustering different non-residential buildings and spaces is an essential part of ensuring healthy economic ecosystems, which in turn form the foundation for a healthy local economy that provides access to ample good quality jobs for residents. This could come in the form of a new or regenerated local centre, a small high street or a new business district.

How does this affect health and wellbeing?

Access to good quality jobs is an important factor in ensuring positive health outcomes, especially when they pay a decent living wage, provide opportunities for in-work development, and have a flexible balance of work and personal life, and when their employees are protected from physically and mentally adverse working conditions.[118] In addition to being an integral part of allowing people to achieve a baseline level of social participation and security (i.e. material wellbeing),[119] it combats the vast array of negative health and wellbeing impacts that unemployment can have.[120] For people with long-term health conditions in particular, good quality employment can have a broad range of health benefits, reducing the chances of chronic disability, long-term incapacity for work and social exclusion.

Further still, where possible the provision of arrangements to work from home can have an array of benefits. Recent research has pointed to benefits including better eating behaviours, improved reported productivity, improved motivational and emotional outcomes, and overall improvements in mood and calmness.[121]

115 Draft London Plan. Greater London Authority. (2017)
116 Understanding Thriving Communities. What Works Wellbeing (2021)
117 Spatial Planning for Health: An evidence resource for planning and designing healthier places (2017)
118 Work, Health and growth: A guide for local councils, Local Government Association, (2023)
119 Is work good for your health and well-being? Gordon Waddell, A Kim Burton, (2006)
120 Fair Society, Healthy Lives: The Marmot Review, Institute of Health Equity, (2010)
121 Experiences of working from home: umbrella review, Charlotte E. Hall, Samantha K. Brooks, Freya Mills, Neil Greenberg, Dale Weston, 2023.

Local services

What do we mean when we say services?

Local services refers to spaces, facilities and social infrastructure such as community centres, schools and educational facilities, town halls, care services and digital services. Access to these services and community spaces are key in helping to combat social isolation, in providing essential moments of connection and in helping us to grow. Our neighbourhoods should therefore provide us with a variety of services that allow us to connect with others and be cared for throughout our lives.

All this comes under the umbrella of social infrastructure, which provides important services and facilities to the community. Ultimately, these services and facilities not only benefit the residents and wider community, but they also go a long way in combating social exclusion and isolation. Services extend beyond the built facilities, covering the infrastructure that helps people connect with their local and global communities, so also include access to reliable and affordable internet services.

How does this affect health and wellbeing?

Access to social infrastructure is a big part of what determines quality of life. In particular, access to recreational and non-recreational destinations can have a positive impact on social interactions for adults,[122] alongside positively affecting mental wellbeing and increased physical activity across different population groups.[123] Furthermore, the provision of community infrastructure can have a positive impact on overall community cohesion, enhance social cohesion,[124] and provide opportunities for the formation of new social connections and bonds.[125] Community hubs have been shown to demonstrate positive effects on community and individual wellbeing, individual empowerment and the social determinants of health.[126]

The benefits of social infrastructure also extend to the provision of affordable and easily accessible internet, as people who are digitally excluded are more likely to have worse access to essential services and be more likely to have worse health outcomes as a result.[127]

122 Spatial Planning for Health: An evidence resource for planning and designing healthier places (2017)
123 Designing healthier neighbourhoods: a systematic review of the impact of the neighbourhood design on health and wellbeing. Ige-Elegbede, J, et al. In Cities & health 6, no. 5 (2022): 1004-1019.
124 Community Cohesion and Resilience - Acknowledging the role and contribution of housing providers. Centre for Local Economic Strategies. (2014)
125 The Impacts of Social Infrastructure Investment A report for local trust. Frontier Economics (2021)
126 Review refresh: Places, spaces, and social connections. What Works Wellbeing (2023)
127 Digital Exclusion Among Mental Health Service Users: Qualitative Investigation. Greer B, et al. In J Med Internet Res 2019;21(1):e11696

Frequently asked questions

How have we created the The Quality of Life Framework?

The Framework came about as the result of desk research, qualitative research and conversations with a range of stakeholders, carried out in 2019 and 2020 in collaboration with Publica and Social Life. In 2020 we worked with David Rudlin and Lorenza Casini of URBED on the first version of the Framework, which was published the same year.

Since 2020, we have used the Quality of Life Framework in a variety of projects and conversations. We interrogated the language used through the Community Consultation for Quality of Life (CCQOL) research project with the universities of Reading, Cardiff, Edinburgh and Ulster. Talking to residents through our work with local authorities, housing associations and developers has furthered our understanding of people's lived experience.

As we've done this work, we've spotted opportunities to build on the Framework's content and to clarify some of the themes it covers. To make sure it continues to be as useful as possible, in 2022 we carried out an evidence review with Breaking Barriers Innovations and Hassell. More recently, in 2023 we carried out a new, extensive literature review exploring the most recent evidence on what makes a home and neighbourhood deliver for people's health and wellbeing. This revised Framework is built on that literature review and our work over the past five years.

Who is the Quality of Life Framework for?

The Framework is a document for use by everyone who has an interest in the way homes and neighbourhoods impact people's health and wellbeing, ranging from communities through to developers and local authorities. It is a tool to allow a variety of stakeholders the opportunity to articulate the things that would have the biggest impact on the way we live in our homes and neighbourhoods.

How can I use the Framework?

The Framework is designed to be used as a reference document, allowing you to dive in and understand the different facets that are important to the quality of life of people and communities.

For a more detailed breakdown of possible uses, alongside examples of how we currently use it, please refer to the Quality of Life Framework Toolkit, which will be available in Autumn 2024.

Is there a cost for using the Framework?

The Quality of Life Framework is a free-to-use document, subject to certain terms and conditions. Please make sure you read these and agree to them before using the Framework.

Importantly, the Framework cannot be used for commercial purposes without the prior written consent of the Quality of Life Foundation.