

Research summary

Urban green nation: Building the evidence base



Introduction

This summary presents the findings of the first of two pieces of research commissioned by CABI Space to gauge the state of England's urban green space and its impact on people's health and well-being.¹

CABI has investigated over 70 major data sources and assembled an inventory of more than 16,000 individual green spaces. We have analysed this data to discover what it says about publicly owned and managed urban green space. We found that (and some of this is not surprising):

- 1. Almost nine out of 10 people use parks and green spaces, and they value them**
- 2. If people are satisfied with local parks, they tend to be satisfied with their council**
- 3. The provision of parks in deprived areas is worse than in affluent areas**
- 4. People from minority ethnic groups tend to have less local green space and it is of a poorer quality**
- 5. The higher the quality of the green space, the more likely it is to be used.**

The research starts to fill the serious information gap highlighted by the Urban Green Spaces Taskforce.² There is no comprehensive, nationwide source of information about the quantity, quality and use of urban green spaces in England, so this study draws together all the data from the research that has been done to date.

Much more information has been gathered on the nation's rural spaces.³ This is the first review of the urban evidence.⁴

What this study demonstrates

The historic decline in green spaces has been arrested and is now being reversed. People are using their parks and green spaces more, and value them more. But not everyone has benefitted equally.

Region-by-region data analysis reveals some interesting variations in quality and quantity, but the most dramatic differences in provision were shown when analysed against deprivation and affluence. Overall, the data reveals how much green space provision differs according to people's socio-economic and cultural background.

These findings have important implications for policymakers, those providing and managing public services, and the many organisations concerned with making a place succeed.

Understanding the nature of places leads to more informed policy development and service delivery at all levels. The mechanisms to create and solve problems are almost always geographically structured.⁵

Public resources need to be targeted to best possible effect, and collecting and managing baseline data about urban green spaces helps to maintain a strategic view, co-ordinate provision, measure the effects of investment or policy initiatives, and respond to changing circumstances. The data can support more equitable access to public services, regardless, for instance, of income or ethnicity.

This study also shows where plenty of information exists and where there are serious gaps, and it clarifies the strengths and weaknesses of existing data. It will help to inform accurate data collection, locally and nationally, and suggests where more work would be most beneficial.

A baseline of data will enable change to be tracked over time and enable planning for a changing climate. Accurate data about quantity, quality and use of green spaces will help connect provision to need.

1 This research was carried out by Heriot-Watt University. The second part was carried out by OPENspace research centre, Edinburgh College of Art, in collaboration with Heriot-Watt University.
2 *Green spaces, better places: final report of the urban green spaces taskforce*, DTLR, 2002.
3 *The green information gap: mapping the nation's green spaces* CABI Space, 2009 outlines the problem of the lack of data about green spaces and sets out three steps to help achieve better information nationally.

About the study

This study set out to:

- make best use of existing sources of relevant data about green spaces in England's urban local authorities⁶
- devise a suite of indicators that could be used to track changes to England's urban green spaces and form a baseline for measuring trends in the future
- interpret and analyse all data around core themes
- identify significant gaps in the existing data.

The study did not include privately owned green spaces, such as communal or private gardens, or the grounds of institutions such as universities and art galleries. It concentrated on publicly owned, managed and maintained spaces that should be accessible to all.

The following core themes were selected to represent a multi-faceted view of green space:

- 1 **quantity**: by type and amount of green space available in urban areas
- 2 **quality**: including subjective assessments, such as resident satisfaction, and objective measures such as biodiversity
- 3 **use**: how people use green space
- 4 **proximity**: the physical location of green space in relation to where people live, and how far people have to travel to access different types of green space
- 5 **management and maintenance**: spending, staffing and how well a space is looked after
- 6 **value**: capturing how important green space is to people.

These themes formed the structure of the subsequent analysis. In particular, we looked for connections between different aspects of green space and the local environment, taking account of wider socio-demographic factors, location, housing density and other issues.

4 The research project used the National Audit Office's list of 154 urban authorities from *Enhancing urban green space*, 2006.
5 *Place matters: the location strategy for the United Kingdom*, Communities and Local Government, 2008.
6 It relates to other sources of evidence such as the *State of the Environment* reports published by the Environment Agency and Natural England <http://cabeurl.com/ba> and <http://cabeurl.com/ab>

Alexandra Park, Olham © Jane Sebire



People from minority ethnic groups tend to have less local green space and it is of a poorer quality

People are now using their parks and green spaces more, and valuing them more than in the past



In 2007, 91 per cent of people thought it was very or fairly important to have green spaces near to where they live, and by 2009 this had risen to 95 per cent

Findings from the study

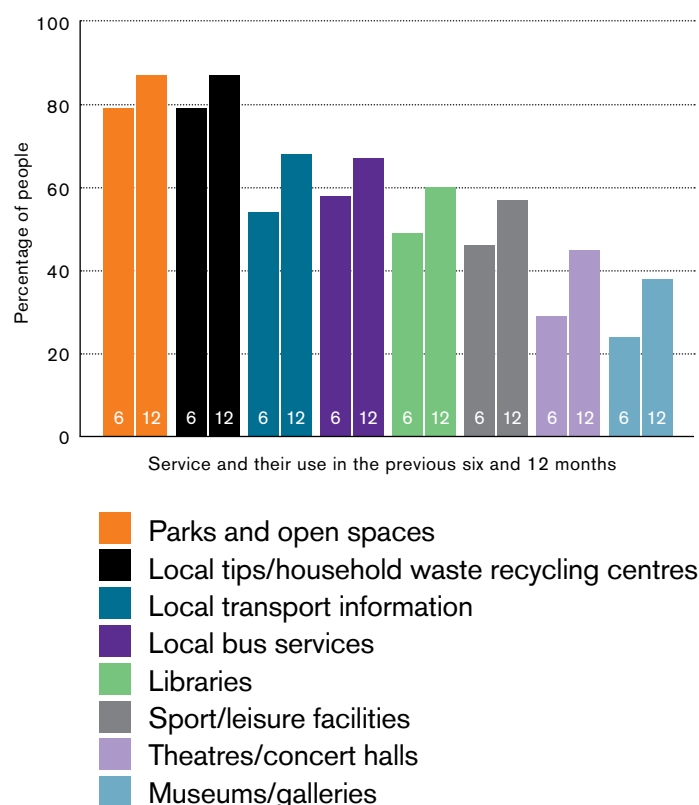
The full research report sets out the evidence relating to the quantity, quality, use, accessibility, management and maintenance and value of public urban green space.

The research report and additional technical information, maps and tables are available at www.cabe.org.uk/publications/urban-green-nation

1. Almost nine out of 10 people use parks and green spaces, and they value them The 2009 *Place survey* found that in urban areas, 87 per cent of the population have used their local park or open space in the last year, and 79 per cent have used it in the last six months. The *Place survey* shows that parks and open spaces are the most frequently used service of all the public services tracked. This compares with 32 per cent who have visited concert halls, and 26 per cent who visited galleries. In fact, Heritage Lottery Fund research reports 1.8 billion visits to parks in England every year.⁷

Furthermore, people appreciate these spaces and this appreciation is increasing: in 2007, 91 per cent of people thought it was very or fairly important to have green spaces near to where they live, and by 2009 this had risen to 95 per cent.⁸

Figure 1: Use of urban parks and open spaces in England



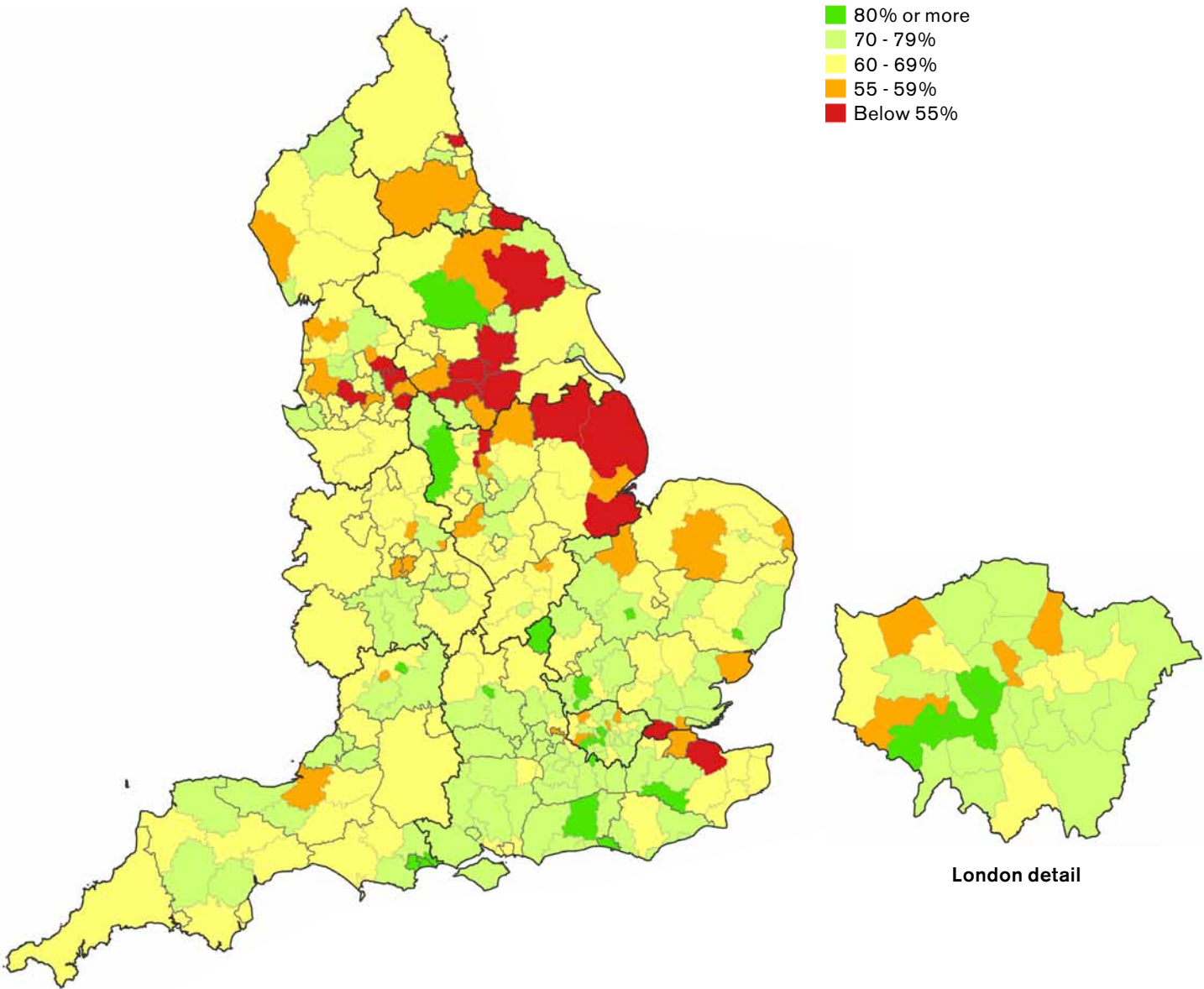
CABE Space is publishing research in 2010 showing the size and scope of England's green space workforce, as part of ongoing work into green skills

⁷ HLF funding for public parks 1 April 1994 – 31 March 2009
Heritage Lottery Fund Policy and strategic development department data briefing, October 2009.

⁸ Survey of public attitudes and behaviours to the environment, 2007 and 2009. <http://cabeurl.com/ax>

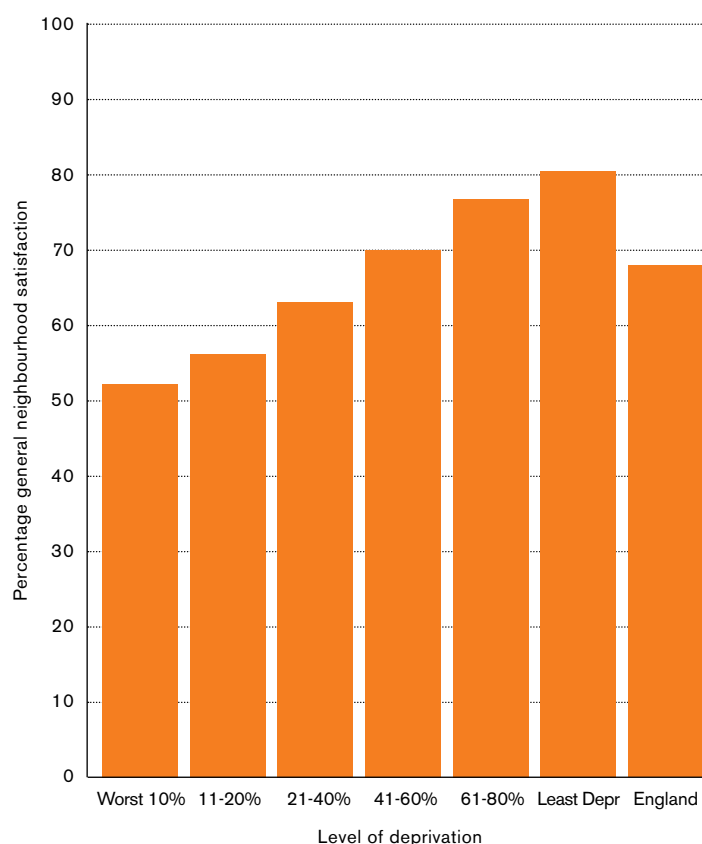
Source: *Place Survey* (2009) Information for urban authorities only.

Map 1: Percentage of residents very or fairly satisfied with parks and open spaces, England and London detail (2009)



2. If people are satisfied with local parks, they tend to be satisfied with their council There is a strong link between people's satisfaction with their local parks and open spaces, and their satisfaction with their neighbourhood. Satisfaction with neighbourhood is one of the key things that affects perceptions of council performance.⁹ This is particularly acute in the most deprived areas, where neighbourhood satisfaction is at its lowest (figure 2). Putting in place an open space strategy is potentially one ingredient of success. Of the authorities that have shown the biggest improvement in residents' satisfaction in the last four years, nearly three quarters have completed their open space strategy.

Figure 2: Neighbourhood satisfaction and deprivation

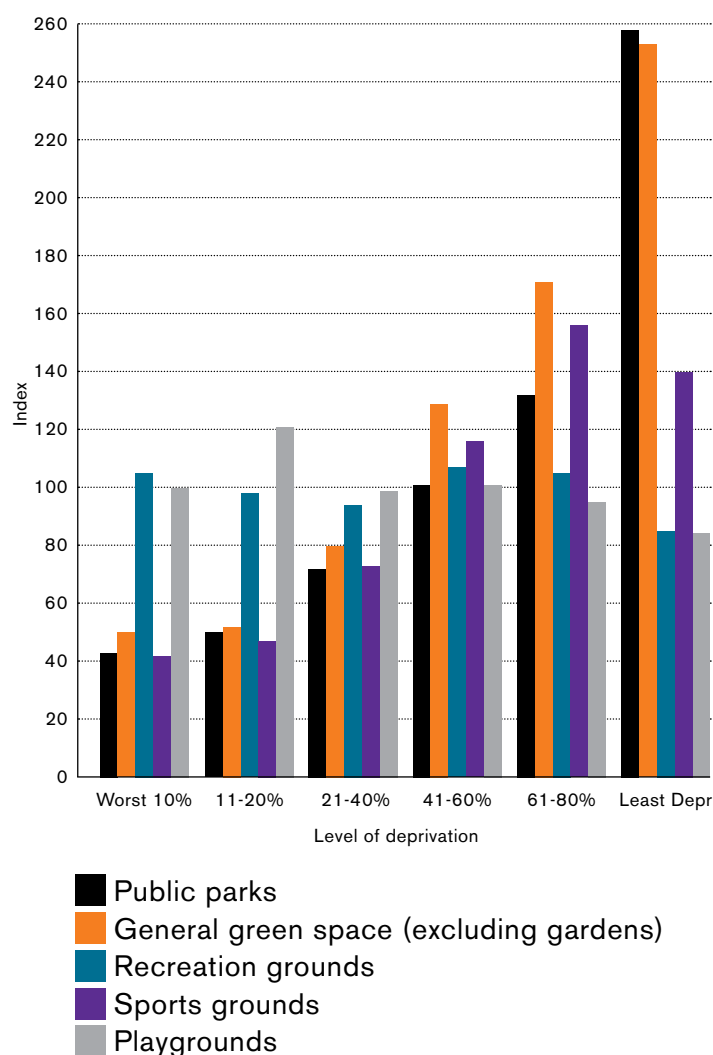


Source: BVPI 2006 survey. Information for urban authorities only.

3. The provision of parks in deprived areas is worse than in affluent areas People in deprived areas, wherever they live, receive a far worse provision of parks and green spaces than their affluent neighbours. They often do not have gardens and so access to good quality public green space matters even more. The most affluent 20 per cent of wards have five times the amount of parks or general green space (excluding gardens) per person than the most deprived 10 per cent of wards (figure 3).

So if you live in an affluent suburb, you are also likely to have an above-average quantity of good parks

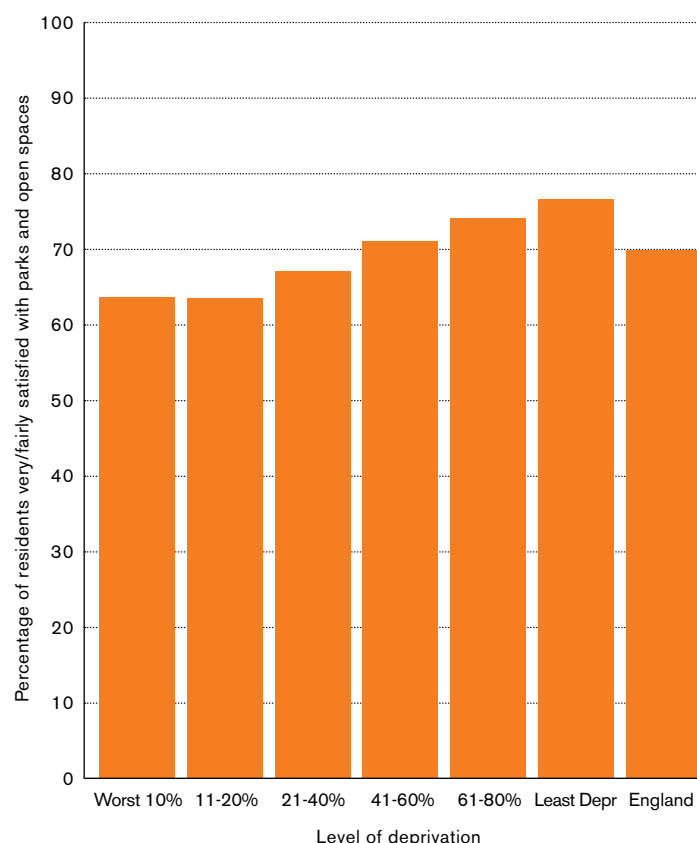
Figure 3: Quantity and type of green space and area deprivation



Sources: CIPFA Leisure, culture and recreation statistics 2007/08 and *Municipal Year Book* (recreation grounds); CABI Space urban green space inventory (public parks); Generalised Land Use Database (general green space); Sport England Facilities data 2009 (sports grounds) Ordnance Survey Points of Interest information (playgrounds). All measures based on area (hectares) of green space per 1,000 population. Deprivation calculated using the Index of Multiple Deprivation 2004.

nearby. On the other hand, if you live in a deprived inner-city ward, with high-density housing, you might have many small, poor-quality green spaces, but you are unlikely to have access to large green spaces, or good quality green space. Comparing deprived and affluent areas, residents' general satisfaction with their neighbourhood falls from around 80 per cent in affluent places to around 50 per cent in the most deprived places (figure 2).

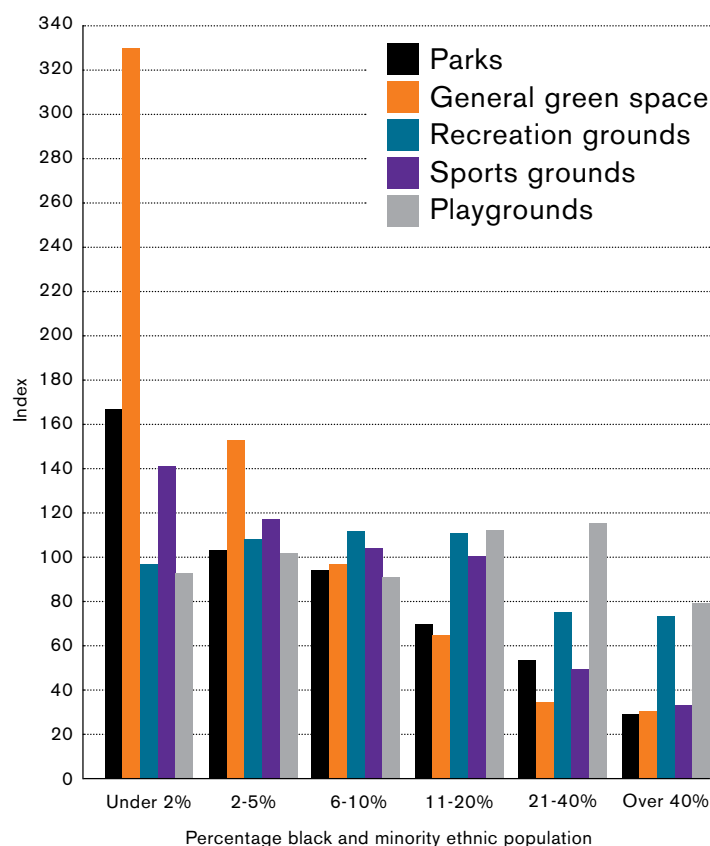
Figure 4: Resident satisfaction with parks and open spaces and area deprivation



Source: BVPI 2006 survey. Information for urban authorities only.

4. People from minority ethnic groups tend to have less local green space and it is of a poorer quality Areas with very few black and minority ethnic residents tend to have more green space, and it is of a good quality. We recognise that this is intimately related to the circularity of disadvantage – nearly all minority ethnic groups are less likely to be in paid employment than white British men and women and are more likely to be living in areas of deprivation.¹⁰

Figure 5: Quantity and type of space by black and minority ethnic population



Sources: CIPFA Leisure, culture and recreation statistics 2007/08 and *Municipal Year Book* (recreation grounds); CABI Space urban green space inventory (public parks); Generalised Land Use Database (general green space); Sport England Facilities data 2009 (sports grounds) Ordnance Survey Points of Interest information (playgrounds). All measures based on area (hectares) of green space per 1,000 population.

Wards that have almost no black and minority ethnic residents (fewer than 2 per cent of ward population) have six times as many parks as wards where more than 40 per cent of the population are people from black and minority ethnic groups. They have 11 times more public green space, if one looks at all types¹¹ and not just parks (figure 5). The differences are most marked on the indicator of general satisfaction with neighbourhood, when analysed by ethnicity (rather than affluence). Only half of residents in wards with more than 40 per cent of their populations from black or minority ethnic groups are satisfied, compared with 70 per cent in wards with fewer than 2 per cent.

10 *An anatomy of economic inequality in the UK – summary*, Report of the National Equality Panel, Government Equalities Office, 2010.

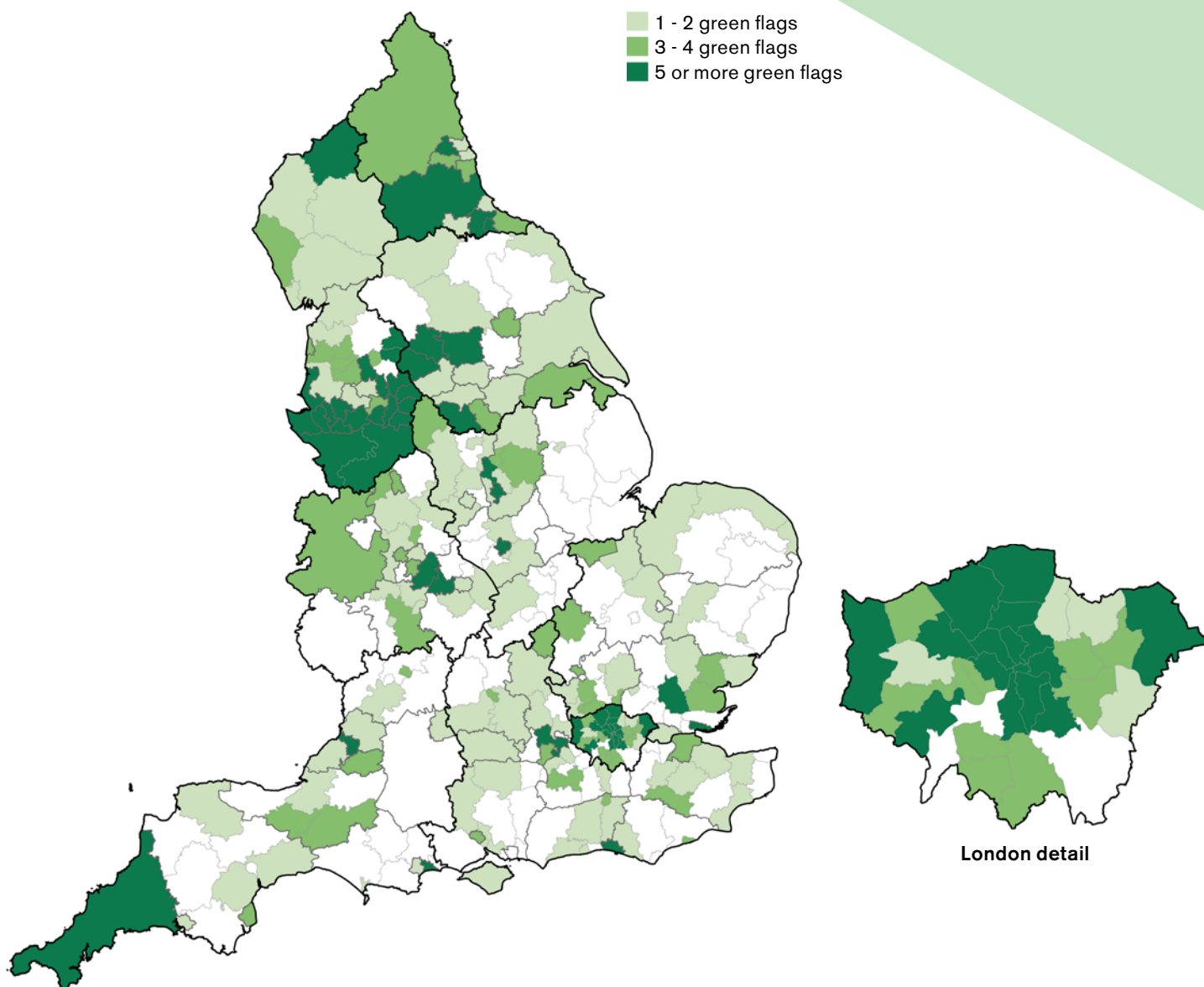
11 Gardens not included.

12 *Effect of exposure to natural environment on health inequalities: an observational population study*, Mitchell, R and Popham, F, *The Lancet*: 372, 2008.

13 The relationship between quality and use is not as clear-cut as other indicators analysed. Local housing density does affect park use. The full study looks at this in more detail.

14 Sport England Active people survey 2005/2006.

Map 2: Number of local authorities with Green Flag Awards, England and London (2009/10)



5. The higher the quality of the green space, the more likely it is to be used Regardless of your economic circumstances, access to green space is beneficial to your health.¹² If an area has high quality parks, it is likely that more residents will use them more often. Parks in the most deprived 10 per cent of wards have an average of 51 visits per year, compared with 62 visits in the most affluent wards.¹³

This pattern is supported by research which found that parks restored with money from the Heritage Lottery Fund have seen average visitor numbers rise by 68 per cent.

It is important to provide green spaces that are appropriate for people of different ages. Young people aged between 16 and 24 report lower quality across all indicators analysed for the study: 15 per cent think

their local parks and open spaces are the aspect of their area that need most improvement, compared with 8 per cent of 55-74 year olds. People's level of physical activity is related to affluence, or lack of it. In the most deprived wards, where quality of green space provision is lower, only 40 per cent of adults engage in moderate physical activity, compared to nearly 60 per cent in the most affluent wards.¹⁴

Overall, the strong correlations between poor quality and quantity of spaces in deprived areas, and the low levels of physical activity of residents, strongly suggest that investing in the quality of parks and green spaces is an important way to tackle inequalities in health and well-being. The second part of the research explores this in more detail.

Next steps

Proving the economic, social and environmental value of urban green space is not straightforward. In addition to the dearth of robust national data, analysis is complicated by the fact that green space value consists of elements that are not easily measured. Green spaces are by their nature multifunctional. But cross-disciplinary investigation has been limited.

There is however great scope for future work. This research is an important start in clarifying what data is already collected on urban green space and how this can be used to best effect.

Research investigating income and race inequalities in access to urban green space is particularly under-developed. This is limited to a handful of studies. Most of the research on ethnicity and landscape in the United Kingdom has focused on rural contexts.¹⁵

The second part of CABI Space's research examines in more depth the impact of the quality of green spaces on the well-being of people living in six deprived urban areas.¹⁶ It focuses on black and minority ethnic communities within these areas and the relationship between perceptions of quality of urban green space and its use. It also shows how investing in parks and green spaces can have a powerful effect in tackling social disadvantage.

¹⁵ For example *The new countryside?* Neal, S and Agyeman, J, 2006.

¹⁶ The second part of research was carried out by OPENspace research centre, Edinburgh College of Art, in collaboration with Heriot-Watt University.



Investing in parks and green spaces can have a powerful effect in tackling social disadvantage

No-one knows exactly how many green spaces there are in our urban areas. Where they are, who owns them or what condition they are in. A CABA Space research project starts to fill this serious information gap, by compiling and analysing data at a national level. This briefing presents the main findings of the research. It will be of interest to policymakers and decision makers in central and local government and anyone interested in understanding more about England's urban green spaces.

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CABA Space is a specialist unit within CABA that aims to bring excellence to the design, management and maintenance of parks and public space in our towns and cities.

Published in 2010 by the
Commission for Architecture
and the Built Environment

Graphic design by
Draught Associates

Cover images: Northala
Fields, Ealing, London
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