

Julian Dobson

We spoke to Julian Dobson, a researcher for our Space to Thrive report into the impact of parks on health, wellbeing and society.

What is the Space to Thrive report?

The Space to Thrive report is an evidence review of the social benefits of urban green spaces and parks, including the benefits to health and wellbeing.

Can you explain how you found that the "quality" of parks is better than the "quantity"?



The Mall, Armagh, after restoration

What’s really clear from the evidence is that parks are really good for people, people like to use them. But if they feel that those spaces aren’t safe, that they aren’t well kept – if there’s lots of broken glass, signs of drug use, if equipment hasn’t been maintained – what is at first a positive becomes a negative. People will actually avoid places they perceive as being dangerous

So the good quality and care [and busyness] of those spaces is really important in terms of making them feel safe, making them feel welcoming – and welcoming for different kinds of people. That’s really important – so that there aren’t communities that feel: "this isn’t our space".

How do parks and green spaces reflect inequalities in society?

Again it comes down to quality. Often in poorer communities, less money, less attention will go on looking after these parks. People get the impression that some neighbourhoods are less well served. Not just in terms of the amount of green space, but how well those spaces are looked after.

It's an increasing factor as parks become more commercialised. As more and more paid-for activities take place in parks, or as you get facilities like cafes that cater to a more affluent end of the market, those parks start to be seen as spaces for people who have money.

> "Parks and green spaces can be really good in terms of helping newcomers, especially refugees and migrants, integrate into communities."

It’s great if you can use your park to earn income, and obviously a good café is wonderful, but if you are increasingly closing off parks for events or you’re making some deliberately cater for more high-end uses, what you have is a kind of gentrification where parks are seen as facilities for middle-class people and not for everybody.

How are you seeing parks help marginalised groups like refugees feel included?



Volunteers in Richmond Park, London

From a lot of the international evidence we see, parks and green spaces can be really good in terms of helping newcomers, especially refugees and migrants, integrate into communities. So things like gardening projects, community projects, or simply a space where people of very different communities can feel safe and feel they can interact with other people.

There has been work done in New Zealand about how gardening projects can be very useful particularly for older migrants. Particularly if you find language a barrier, a shared knowledge of things like growing and caring for plants and

being in the outdoors can be really important.

What do you think the UK government should be doing?

First of all it's important that the funds are there to keep parks well maintained and looked after. There has to be much greater recognition by the health service and by health practitioners of the value green spaces bring.

We're also saying that parks should be seen as an asset rather than a liability. Parks are an important asset in keeping your population well and in having a healthy environment, so you should be looking after them.

Can you give an example of a good park?

Manor Fields Park in Sheffield where I live. It was previously really off-putting, it had severe vandalism, it was really not looked after. Now it's a place that's got allotments and growing schemes, its got a parkrun. It's an asset to the community. But it’s taken a long time and long-term investment to get there.

What have you seen change over your years of researching parks?

There has been a lot of evidence in recent years on how increasingly at risk parks are. Budgets have been cut very significantly. The number of staff involved in looking after parks and green spaces is a lot less. There is increasing pressure on local authorities to sell parks that they feel that they can’t look after, particularly for development.

> "We need to make sure that we don't lose our urban green spaces just when we most need them."

Alongside that, there is a much greater understanding of how important parks are in terms of health and wellbeing. And that parks are a really important asset in terms of adapting to climate change: they cool down the temperature in cities, they absorb carbon, they help to clean the air, they provide habits for wildlife.

We need to make sure that we don't lose our urban green spaces just when we most need them.

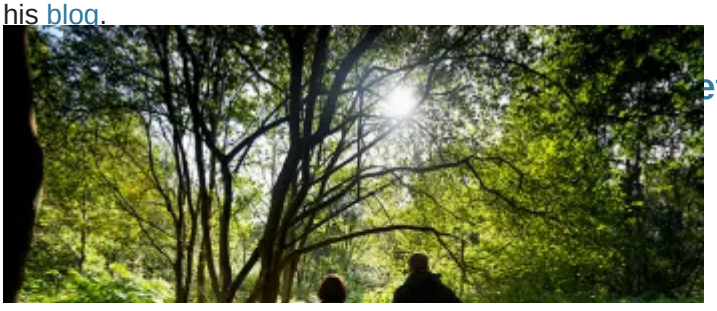
Find out more and what's next

Find the full report and also read CEO of Mind, Paul Farmer's blog about parks and wellbeing.

Space to Thrive is the first part of our Parks for People evaluation. In the second part, published later this year, the benefits of parks will be brought to life though six case studies of funded public parks.

Julian Dobson

Julian Dobson works at The University of Sheffield and Urban Pollinators. Find out more about his work on Twitter and his blog.



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Chris Packham and Jamal Edwards celebrate 25 years of funding for nature