

Research on experiences of, and barriers to, accessing nature in the UK



Roughly **1 in 5 people** are deprived of green space in the UK¹



Urban green spaces have been the most frequently visited type of green and natural space for the last four years²

62%

In 2023-24, **62% of adults with a physical or mental health condition or illness had visited a green space in the last 14 days**, compared to 70% of adults without a condition or illness²



Friends of the Earth research has found there is a strong **correlation between green space deprivation and ethnicity**¹.

Barriers to accessing nature

Emotional

25% of young adults

aged 18-24 said that they had been prevented from enjoying nature because of not feeling physically safe or safe from harm³

Physical

42% of people

living in the South West said it was difficult to access the green spaces they liked to visit using public transport²

Financial

56% of people

with an annual household income less than £20,000 said that it was difficult to visit the green spaces they enjoyed without a car²

Information

45% of respondents

to a survey about green and blue spaces said that finding information about accessible facilities is challenging⁴

Culture and ethnicity

Almost 40%

of people from ethnically minoritised backgrounds live in the most “green-space deprived” areas⁵

£2.1 billion

in health costs could be saved annually if everyone in England had access to high-quality green spaces due to increased physical activity⁶

Levels of access to nature

Since April 2020, Natural England has been running The People and Nature Survey, which captures how people in England experience and think about the environment. Data from the last year shows that 67% of adults had visited a green space in the past 14 days². Of those people, 92% agreed that spending time outdoors was good for their physical health, and 89% agreed it was good for their mental health². However, not everyone can access or benefit from green spaces. In research commissioned by the British Mountaineering Council, only 38% of respondents said they could easily access the countryside⁷.

The People and Nature Survey data from the last year shows that 62% of people with a physical or mental health condition or illness said they had visited a green space in the past 14 days, compared to 70% of those without a condition or illness².

Barriers to accessing nature

In this insights sheet, we have grouped barriers to accessing nature into five areas: emotional, physical, financial, barriers related to information provision, and cultural barriers or barriers related to ethnicity.

Emotional barriers

Other people's attitudes and behaviour towards disabled people can be a barrier to accessing nature. Natural England, in their "Included Outside" research series, found that assumptions and stereotypes can range from "reduced expectations of people living with disabilities undertaking adventurous activities to a lack of awareness and negative judgements of those living with less visible and hidden disabilities"⁸. Feeling like you cannot be physically safe can be an overwhelming barrier to nature. For people living with progressive mental or physical disabilities, navigating nature can be challenging because experiences that were once deemed enjoyable and accessible are now supplemented with anxiety⁸. Disabled people might feel an increased sense of vulnerability when being in nature due to the unpredictability of being outside (such as weather conditions and availability of facilities) or poor management of the green space⁸.

Physical barriers

Disabled people might be unable to drive or not have access to a private vehicle and might be limited to using public transport. Solely relying on public transport can make nature even more inaccessible due to a lack of wheelchair/mobility scooter accessibility, limited availability, and often restricted timetables⁸. Lack of public transport, no drop-off facilities, and no step-free or wheelchair-accessible routes are significant physical barriers to accessing nature⁴.

If someone can overcome the numerous barriers related to transport and physical access before entering, there can also be barriers within a green space. Researchers found that people with visual impairments found that there were difficulties locating entrances and exits, using gates and turnstiles, understanding signage, using uneven terrain, potholes, overhanging trees, bushes, and other obstacles⁴.

Financial barriers

Individuals on a low-income face significant barriers to accessing nature. People earning the living wage are twice as likely to never visit the countryside compared to higher-wage earners⁷. Many natural spaces are far away from urban areas, and transportation costs or limited transport options restrict access. The expenses involved in visiting natural spaces, such as paying for entry and activities, can also act as a barrier to engagement. 56% of people with an income under £20,000 find it difficult to access green spaces both without a car and on public transport². These barriers are more likely to affect disabled individuals, who have a 23% poverty rate, and people who are ethnically minoritised, who experience greater rates of poverty than white people⁹.

Barriers related to information provision

A lack of clear, accessible information about natural spaces is a key barrier to access¹⁰. It is not only about access but understanding how to reach these spaces, what they offer, the conditions to expect, and how to navigate the space once there. Providing detailed information ahead of time - such as surface types, path gradients, distances, and available facilities - helps visitors make informed decisions. Without this information, people may

avoid outdoor spaces¹¹. Providing information in multiple formats and languages, including physical signage, digital platforms, audio descriptions, and multilingual text, can help ensure accessibility for all potential visitors.

Cultural barriers and barriers related to ethnicity

There are significant disparities in how different communities engage with green spaces, shaped by geographic, cultural, and social barriers. Nearly 40% of ethnically minoritisedⁱ people live in the most 'green space deprived' areas, compared to 14% of white people¹. According to the People and Nature Survey, 61% of people ethnically minoritised said they visited green space in the past 14 days compared to 69% of white people². There is also a lack of representation in environmental organisations and nature-based activities, with ethnically minoritised people rarely portrayed as leaders or knowledge-holders in these spaces¹². Additionally, only 39% of ethnically minoritised people live within a 5-minute walk of a green space, compared to 58% of white people⁵. This geographical divide makes access to nature more challenging for ethnically minoritised communities, requiring more time and effort and further limiting engagement.

Impact of a lack of opportunities to access nature

If everyone in England had access to high-quality green spaces, the country could save £2.1 billion annually in health costs due to increased physical activity⁶. However, unequal access means those at greatest risk of poor health often benefit least from these spaces. According to a YouGov poll conducted by the Mental Health Foundation, nearly half (44%) of respondents reported not connecting with nature often enough to experience its mental health benefits, and 38% wished to connect more frequently with nature³. Despite growing evidence supporting the value of nature for human health, as of 2023, the UK ranked the lowest of 14 European nations in terms of nature connectedness⁷. Furthermore, the UN declared that access to a clean, safe and healthy natural environment is a human right, which has not yet been legally adopted in England¹³.

ⁱ For the purposes of this document, we have used the language “ethnically minoritised” to represent individuals and groups who have been minoritised through societal and historical processes linked to their racial or ethnic identity, rather than being within the global minority. Some of the literature referenced in this document used alternative language, which we have chosen to update here.

Sources

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