what works wellbeing

Places, spaces, people and wellbeing

Can we improve social relations and community wellbeing through better community infrastructure?

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the big idea

This briefing is based on a **systematic review of the evidence** of projects, programmes and other interventions that aim to boost social relations or community wellbeing by making changes to community places and spaces.

There is promising evidence (based on a larger number of poor quality evidence) that a range of approaches to community infrastructure can be used to boost social relations and wellbeing in a community, giving people involved a range of options. As the evidence currently stands, we cannot say which approach is most effective, as studies have not compared one approach to another. So we cannot make strong recommendations for a specific approach.

The review also found promising evidence about ways of doing things that are more likely to lead to success, and ways of doing things that are probably not helpful. These facilitators and barriers to success were common themes across all the interventions.

It is important to note that the search found few high quality studies, and the majority of the evidence of impact is categorised as 'promising'.

While there is especially keen interest among practitioners and policymakers to find out what works when it comes to the impact of place-making; urban regeneration; and improving social relations and reducing inequality through strengthening community infrastructure - the evidence that exists is of poor quality. See the box on page two for more on this.

> "People in my community need to have a sense that they actually matter"
>
> **Public dialogue participant**
> *Bristol*
> Read the Centre's
> Public Dialogue

We sifted through 21,335 studies and 51 were included

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concepts explained

Community wellbeing is a complex idea. Our working definition for this review is: 'Community wellbeing is the combination of social, economic, environmental, cultural, and political conditions identified by individuals and their communities as essential for them to flourish and fulfil their potential.' [Wiseman and Brasher 2008: 358]

Community infrastructure is defined as:

- Public places and 'bumping' places designed for people to meet, including streets, squares, parks, play areas, village halls and community centres.

- Places where people meet informally or are used as meeting places in addition to their primary role, such as cafes, pubs, libraries, schools and churches.

- Services that can facilitate access to places to meet, including urban design, landscape architecture and public art, transport, public health organisations, subsidised housing sites, and bus routes.

The focus of our review has been on interventions operating at the neighbourhood level rather than city or national level. Virtual spaces, such as social media, are beyond the scope of this review, although these are important and there is a growing evidence base.

Social relations underpins many ideas, such as social capital and sense of community. It is a term that covers a wide variety of interactions, interconnections, and exchanges between human beings and the physical and social environment.

What type of interventions were reviewed?

Community hubs - community centres or community anchor organisations focused on health and wellbeing that can be either locality-based or work as a network. Community hubs, such as healthy living centres, typically provide multiple activities and services that address health or the wider determinants of health, most of which are open to the wider community.

Events - temporary events that take place at a community level, such as festivals, markets, art events, street parties, concerts. Events can range from a one-off activity to a regular, sometimes weekly, occurrence.

Neighbourhood design - the scale, form or function of buildings and open space.

Green and blue space - any natural green space: parks, woodland, gardens; or blue space: rivers, canals, or the coast.

Place-making - the role of arts, culture and heritage in helping to shape the places where we live.

Alternative use of space - temporary changes to the way that people interact with a space, such as closure of streets for children to play; a 'civic game' that involved collecting items from different places; public art installations; a 'pop-up park'.

Urban regeneration - the process of improving derelict or dilapidated districts of a city, typically through redevelopment.

Community development - a long-term value-based process which aims to address imbalances in power and bring about change founded on social justice, equality and inclusion.

Can't find your project, programme or activity?

It is important to note that a lack of evidence about an intervention does not mean that it is not effective.

The finding that there is limited evidence for some intervention types suggests that more rigorous research needs to be done.

It is equally important to have evidence of what does *not* work. The only evidence of no effect were two studies of 'top down' street design infrastructure changes, which showed no change in social interaction outcomes and only showed changes in safety.

what evidence did we find?

Key messages: the five minute read

Community hubs can: promote social cohesion by bringing together different social or generational groups; increase social capital and build trust; and interaction between community members; and increase people's knowledge or skills.
Community hubs also increase wider social networks.

Changes to neighbourhood design can positively affect sense of belonging and pride in a community.

Green and blue space interventions that provide the opportunity to participate in activities or gatherings can improve social interactions; increase social networks social interactions and bonding and bridging social capital; increase physical activity and healthy eating; and improve community members' skills and knowledge.

Interventions that provide a focal point, or targeted group activity, may help to: promote social cohesion between different groups; and overcome barriers that may prevent some people (in marginalised groups) from taking part.

Policy makers and commissioners need to be aware of:

- **Accessiblity** - Changes to places and spaces should be accessible in terms of ability, attitude, culture, finance, transport and location.

- **Involvement** - Community members should have the opportunity to be involved in organisation and planning of changes to places and spaces.

- **Potential exclusion** - Some changes, particularly those intended to celebrate a local community, may have the potential to leave some community members feeling excluded.

- **Sustainablity** - It is important to look at outcomes in the long-term, and sustainability.

- **Marginalised groups** - Changes which involve a group-based activity or other reason to interact may be more successful at removing barriers to participation for marginalised groups

Community groups, leaders and residents need to:

- **Provide an accessible, comfortable, safe and friendly environment.**
- **Remove barriers to inclusion**, and actively reach out to the wider community, particularly when changes are designed to celebrate a particular section of the community.

- **Involve skilled community facilitators** to ensure that all sectors of the community are represented and consensus can be reached.

- **Consider involving volunteers** as a way of boosting long-term sustainability.

There are three types of evidence

strong
We can be confident that the evidence can be used to inform decisions.

promising
We have moderate confidence. Decision makers may wish to incorporate further information to inform decisions.

initial
We have low confidence. Decision makers may wish to incorporate further information to inform decisions.

Qualitative or quantitative evidence?

Where you see the following symbols it indicates:

QUANTATIVE

QUALITATIVE

Strong, promising and initial evidence refer to high, moderate and low quality evidence / confidence as per GRADE and CERQual guidance. For further information on these classifications, please see the Centre's **Methods Guide**.

All evidence should be considered alongside questions of possible benefits and risks, affordability, acceptability, feasibility and wider impacts, including equity issues, in the user setting. Where the evidence is less strong, these other considerations become even more important.

what evidence did we find? (cont.)

Relationship between interventions and outcomes

**What impact is your event or temporary space likely to have on the local area?**

We know that practitioners often want to understand what outcomes can be expected from different interventions.

We have mapped the ways that different interventions can be associated with different outcomes.
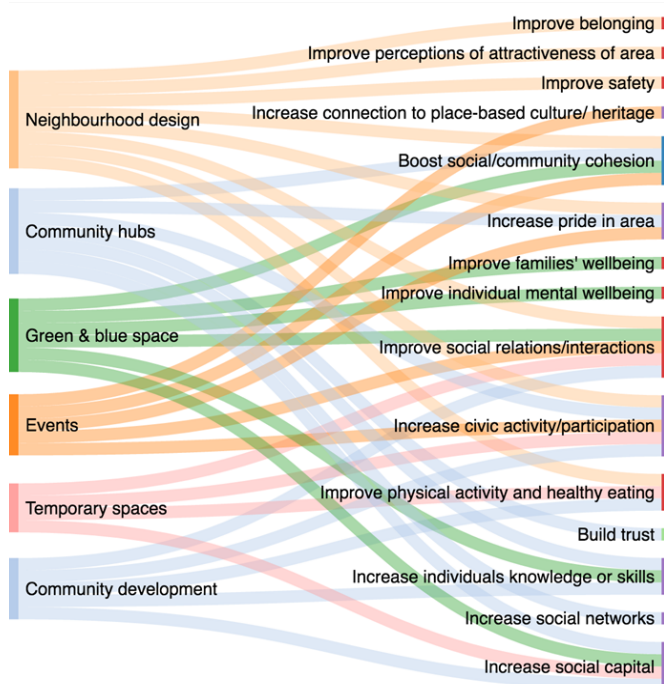
What would help bring together different members of your local community?

As well as what activities can generate specific outcomes.
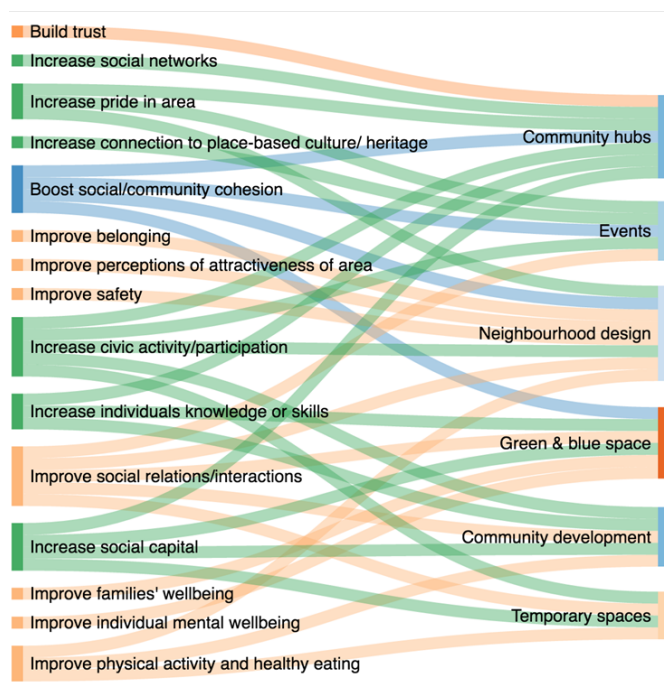
Below, we've attempted to bring together some of the key information on implementing activities. Each box contains approximate costs, potential community benefits, length of impact, and scale of impact (written above box). This information was gathered from the subset of the studies reviewed in the systematic review and is intended to give a general outline rather than an exhaustive review of these practicalities. **The studies used ave little evidence on long-term effects We also made assumptions about the length of time the infrastructure was in place.**

Neighbourhood

NEIGHBOURHOOD DESIGN

Kinds of activities reviewed
Neighbourhood design, including cycle paths, and pedestrianisation

Potential community benefits
Bringing together people from different social backgrounds, social capital and social relations, enhanced community spirit, sense of pride in local area, attractiveness of area, sense of identity, civic participation

Cost per person benefitting: **Medium to high**

Length of impact: **Long-term**

Neighbourhood or town centre

PUBLIC ART

Kinds of activities reviewed
Art intervention in public space

Potential community benefits
For people who use the space: improved social relations, sense of pride in local area, use of public space.

Cost per person benefitting: **very low**

Length of impact: **Variable**

Hamlets and villages

COMMUNITY HUB OR DEVELOPMENT

Kinds of activities reviewed
Community-led initiatives with varied forms, from creation of community hubs, to regenerating community assets.

Potential community benefits
Social cohesion, social capital and trust between people, broaden social networks, sense of pride in local area, civic participation.

Cost per person benefitting: **very low**

Length of impact: **Variable**

Villages to large cities

FESTIVAL

Kinds of activities reviewed
From small scale community-organised festivals to an international balloon festival

Potential community benefits
Improved social relations, community cohesion, sense of pride in local area, connection to place-based culture, and civic participation area, use of public space.

Cost per person benefitting: **very low**

Length of impact: **Short**

Small scale

INTENSIVE TARGETED PROGRAMME

Kinds of activities reviewed
Men in Sheds programme

Potential community benefits
Bringing together people from different social backgrounds, social capital, social networks

Cost per person benefitting: **High**

Length of impact: **Unknown**

Varied: 150-1600 flats

HOUSING REGENERATION

Kinds of activities reviewed
Regenerating housing with social and often environmental objectives

Potential community benefits
Improved social relations, sense of pride in local area, attractiveness of area.

Cost per person benefitting: **Medium to high**

Length of impact: **Long-term**

Neighbourhood or small town

COMMUNITY GARDEN

Kinds of activities reviewed
Community garden in rural deprived area

Potential community benefits
Social cohesion between different generations, cultural and socioeconomic groups, social capital, social networks, bringing families together, sense of community and sense of pride in local area, civic participation, solidarity, dispel stereotypes.

Cost per person benefitting: **Low to medium**

Length of impact: **variable**

what evidence did we find? (cont.)

Focus on: community hubs

Community hubs are community centres or community anchor organisations focused on health and wellbeing that can be either locality based or work as a network. Community hubs, such as healthy living centres, typically provide multiple activities and services that address health or the wider determinants of health, most of which are open to the wider community.

Community hubs may promote social cohesion through the mixing of different social, age or generational groups.

Community hubs may increase social capital and build trust between people in communities.

Community hubs may increase wider social networks and interaction between community members.

Community hubs may increase community members' sense of pride in their local area.

Changes to community hubs may increase civic participation.

Community hubs can increase individuals' knowledge or skills.

Focus on: Community development

Community development is a long-term value-based process which aims to address imbalances in power and bring about change founded on social justice, equality and inclusion.

Community development projects can increase opportunities for social interaction between different ethnic and age groups.

Community development projects can increase social capital in the community.

Community development projects may lead to increased civic participation.

Community development projects may lead to improved individual behavior in terms of physical activity and healthy eating.

Community development projects may lead to improved knowledge and skills among community members

What does the qualitative evidence tell us about community hubs?

Qualitative evidence found that activities - including temporary street pedestrianisation, community gardening - changes to church services, and civic games, created opportunities for people from different ethnic groups or different age groups to interact.

Focus on: events

Temporary **events** that took place a community level, such as festivals, markets, art events, street parties, concerts. Events ranged from a one-off activity to a regular, sometimes weekly, occurrence.

- Events may improve social relations in a community by providing a 'hub' for people to meet.

- Events can improve community cohesion by providing a neutral space for different groups to socialise.

- Events may increase community members' sense of pride in their local area.

- Events may provide opportunities to connect to place-based culture or heritage.

- Events may increase engagement in civic activity.

The evidence also showed that events having the potential to create feelings of exclusion among the wider community.

Focus on: local neighbourhood design

This involves the scale, form or function of buildings and open space.

- Changes to neighbourhood design may increase social cohesion by bringing together people from different ages and social backgrounds.

- Community-led neighbourhood design projects have the potential to improve social relations.

- Changes to neighbourhood design may positively affect sense of belonging and pride in a community

- Changes to neighbourhood design improve community members' perceptions about the attractiveness of the area.

- Changes to neighbourhood design may increase civic activity.

- Changes to neighbourhood design may lead to increases in physical activity, as well as other health benefits.

- Changes to local neighbourhood design can lead to community members feeling safer.

What does the qualitative evidence tell us about events?

Qualitative evidence found that events can create a sense of belonging and pride. Local festivals have been associated with an increased sense of belonging and place attachment among the host community (Black, 2016).

Festivals were opportunities for showing off the unique or special qualities of the town or village (Black, 2016; McLean & Rahder, 2013) and celebrating shared identity (Black, 2016; McLean & Rahder, 2013; Whitford & Ruhanen, 2013; Yuen & Glover, 2005).

Events contribute to consolidation, integration (Black, 2016), and reconciliation (Whitford & Ruhanen, 2013, p. 54); "a celebration of the community coming together".

What doesn't work to improve wellbeing in neighbourhood design?

The two studies in the review that showed no impact on social relations were both 'top down' urban renewal projects.

Evidence suggest it is important for community members to have an opportunity to be involved in organisation and planning of changes to places and spaces.

Focus on: green and blue space

Green and blue space is any natural green space - parks, woodland, gardens - or blue space, such as rivers, canals, or the coast.

Green and blue space interventions that provide the opportunity to participate in activities or meetings can improve social interactions.

Green and blue space interventions may increase community cohesion by encouraging mixing of different cultural and socioeconomic groups.

Improvements to green & blue space may lead to increased social networks, social interactions and bonding and bridging social capital.

Green space changes can improve family wellbeing by providing something for families to do together .

Improvements to green and blue space are associated with increased civic activity.

Improvements to green and blue space may results in positive behavioural change, encouraging physical activity and healthy eating.

Changes to green and blue space may have a positive effect on community members' skills and knowledge.

Green and blue space were found to increase community cohesion by encouraging mixing of different cultural and socioeconomic groups. The act of community gardening was shown to bring people together and to foster intergroup relationships (Mangadu et al., 2016; Porter & McIlvaine-Newsad, 2013).

The installation of an accessible trail through woodland, including information about the forest, contributed to solidarity and tolerance and therefore social integration (Vering, 2006).

The process of making changes to a green or blue space was also found to create cohesion. The organising committee of a new skate park used the project as an opportunity to create better understanding between the group, local young people, and the community (Shipway, 2016).

Community gardens increased the sense of community and positive social interactions (Mangadu et al., 2016; Ohmer et al., 2009)

How applicable is the evidence to the UK context?

Although we did not rank studies according to their similarity to the UK context, we did assess their transferability and found that all eight intervention approaches were relevant and could be used in a UK setting.

For example: riverside development in Northumberland; local neighbourhood design in central Manchester; rural festivals; the New Deal for Communities urban renewal programme; community wildlife sites; community cafes; cycling and walking infrastructure.

Focus on: alternative use of space

Alternative use of space involved temporary changes to the way that people interact with a space e.g. closure of streets for children to play; a 'civic game' that involved collecting items from different places; public art installations; a 'pop-up park'.

Interventions which change the use of a space temporarily may improve social interactions and opportunities for social interactions.

Interventions which change the use of a space temporarily may increase opportunities for interaction between people from different ethnic or social groups.

Interventions which change the use of a space temporarily may lead to increased civic activity.

Interventions which change the use of a space temporarily may lead to positive behavioural change in terms of physical activity and diet.

Unwanted outcomes

Community members may perceive that sometimes changes to neighbourhood design can create new problems or transfer existing issues from one area to another.

Changes to neighbourhood design, temporary change of use of space or even some features or urban regeneration may lead to exclusion or segregation of certain groups.

Community development projects may lead to some people being or perceiving that they are excluded.

Top-down urban renewal projects may not improve social relations in communities.

How useful is qualitative evidence?

A limitation of qualitative evidence, similarly to observational studies, is that it can give us an indication of an effect but it cannot prove a casual association.

In addition, it does not tell us the size of any effect, and does not usually draw on a representative sample, so the findings are less generalisable to the wider population than the findings from quantitative studies.

However, good quality qualitative evidence is valuable in helping us understand how, why and in what circumstances an intervention may work or not work.

Further related reading

Places, spaces, people and wellbeing: full report (2018)

Social relations scoping review (2017)

Understanding local needs for wellbeing data (2017)

What is comunity wellbeing? Coneptual review (2018)

Sources and references

You can find all the references for the studies reffered to in this briefing in the full evidence review at whatworkswellbeing.org

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