

Review refresh: Places, spaces and social connections

Updating the 2018 review to include evidence from the past five years

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THE QUICK READ

In 2018 we published a review of the changes made to community places and spaces that are designed to boost social relations and individual and community wellbeing.

Five years on, we have refreshed the review demonstrating how the evidence base has grown. Its findings were combined with those of the original review.

We found:

1. Strong evidence for **community hubs** and **community development improving social relations, individual and community wellbeing** (evidence was moderate in 2018 review).
2. Many interventions brought about **both positive and negative impacts on wellbeing** – for instance, local events can improve community wellbeing for many but have a detrimental impact on those they exclude (as also found in [Different People, Same Place](#)).
3. The **number of studies in this evidence base has doubled in five years**.¹

The refresh provides **greater differentiation between types of interventions and their impact** on wellbeing and social relations.

The refresh was conducted by Leeds Beckett University in partnership with the University of Liverpool, and funded by the National Lottery Community Fund.



¹ 51 included papers from 2017–2022; 51 included studies from 1997–2016

BACKGROUND

In 2018 we published our original [systematic review](#) of changes made to community places and spaces that were designed to boost social relations and individual and community wellbeing.

The review looked at three key questions:

1. How effective are these changes?
2. What factors affect effectiveness?
3. What are people's subjective experiences?

It found evidence that a range of approaches to changing community infrastructure can lead to improved social relations and community wellbeing.

Of the 51 included studies from 1997 – 2017, few were deemed high quality. Almost all the evidence was limited to a categorisation of 'promising'.

The review called for improved evaluations of interventions implemented in the UK (or that may be implemented in the UK), and highlighted particular gaps in the evidence for:

- Events
- Placemaking
- Alternative use of space
- Urban regeneration
- Community development.

In 2021 we undertook a [practice-based case study synthesis of evidence](#) on how green spaces and community hubs can enhance wellbeing in place. The response to this, coupled with the original research team's continued activity in and knowledge of the evidence base, led us to our current refresh.



THE STUDY

What We Did

As this was a refresh of the evidence, the same search parameters as the original 2018 review were used. See our [registration of the search made on PROSPERO](#).

The refresh was undertaken by the same research team who conducted the original review, led by Leeds Beckett University working in partnership with the University of Liverpool. As with the original review, What Works Centre for Wellbeing hosted a [call for evidence](#).

The concepts of community wellbeing, community infrastructure and social relations, and the definitions of eight intervention types from the 2018 review were maintained for the refresh. See below for definitions.

The focus of both the original review and the refresh was on interventions operating at the neighbourhood level (rather than city or national). Virtual spaces were beyond the scope.

The concepts

Community wellbeing is about being well together. Our working definition for this review 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.

Social relations underpin many ideas, such as [social capital](#) and sense of community. It covers a wide variety of human interactions, interconnections, and exchanges between human beings and the physical and social environment. The connections with people around us are an important determinant of individual and community wellbeing, leading to social values such as trust in others and social cooperation. (Evans, 2015)

The intervention types

Community hubs – community centres or community anchor organisations focused on health and wellbeing that can either be locality-based or work as a network. They typically provide activities and services open to the wider community that address health or the wider determinants of health.

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, public art installations or 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.

































Making the cut








WHAT DID WE FIND?

The full report for the refresh incorporates the studies and findings from the original 2018 review, superseding it.

The key findings listed below are derived from all 102 included studies across 1997–2022.

		Outcomes		
		Social Relations	Community Wellbeing	Individual Wellbeing
Intervention Types	Community hubs	 +	 +	 +
	Events	 +	 +  -	 +
	Neighbourhood design	 +	 +  -	 +
	Green & blue space	 +  -	 +  -	 +
	Placemaking	 +	 +  -	 +
	Alternative use of space	 +	 +	 +
	Urban regeneration	 +  -	 +  -	 +  -
	Community development	 +	 +	 +

Key

Evidence Strength:	 strong	Impact on outcomes:	 positive
	 moderate		 weak
	 weak		

See the [briefing webpage](#) and Appendix G of the full report for more detailed breakdowns.

COVID-19

There was limited evidence relating to the pandemic, which could be because relevant studies are still yet to be published and because online interventions were out of the scope of this refresh.

Those that were included found:

- **Green and blue spaces support social relations, individual and community wellbeing**, although the closure of some facilities meant some spaces became problematic to use (e.g. play parks and public toilets).
- **Some spaces became [more] contested** and/or overcrowded as a result of covid restrictions.
- **Some volunteering opportunities, and the benefits derived from them, ceased.**
- **Communities were quick to respond in adapting interventions**, providing them virtually or in a socially distanced manner, as well as pivoting to provide alternative services.
- **Some improvements arising from interventions were lost due to lockdown restrictions.**

RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

What the research tells us

In 2018, the review found good quality evidence was lacking in five of the eight theme areas. Now **the evidence base is much stronger**. An evidence gap remains for high-quality research on placemaking.

There are also gaps in the evidence comparing rural and urban settings, as well as interventions made during the pandemic (although this could be due a publication lag). Those that did refer to the pandemic confirmed that it was a disruptive event for communities and community-based organisations.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

For researchers and research funders

- Further research into place and space interventions designed to boost social relations and community in **rural settings**.
- More methodologically robust studies of **placemaking** interventions, using larger sample sizes and consistent concepts and measures.
- A review of interventions to boost social relations and community wellbeing in **virtual or hybrid spaces**.
- Further research to **understand the reach of wellbeing interventions** within communities, including with **individuals and groups that do not participate in them**.
- Further research should use appropriate methodologies to understand more explicitly **what works, for whom, and in what context**.

For policy makers, commissioners and funders

- The body of evidence is much stronger than in 2018 and provides a **menu of possible wellbeing interventions linked to positive outcomes**.
- Use **inclusive engagement** to ensure community wellbeing interventions have positive outcomes for a diverse range of groups.
- Carry out an **impact assessment** to give attention to the potential negative or unequal impacts of any interventions.
- **Articulate a broad range of outcomes** from interventions that build social relations in places or spaces within programme and funding specifications to help ensure they are properly captured.
- Support commissioned interventions with **resources for robust evaluation**, especially in rural areas.

For practitioners

- The body of evidence is much stronger than in 2018 and provides a **menu of possible wellbeing interventions linked to positive outcomes** for practitioners to consider.
- **Use a flexible approach**, allowing activities and volunteer involvement to evolve over time.
- Develop a **friendly and safe environment** to make users feel welcome and included.
- Pay attention to inclusion and **reducing barriers** to ensure that activities are accessible.
- **Consider the transferability of interventions** and whether local adaptations should be made (e.g. urban to rural).
- **Directly address the emerging issue of contested space**, in relation to different communities of interest, age groups and newer vs more established residents, as well as differing priorities regarding making outdoor spaces accessible and keeping the natural biodiversity of wild spaces.

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Briefing

Suggested citation:

Martin, S. and Bignall-Donnelly, R.
Review refresh: Places, spaces and social connections.
Briefing, February 2023,
What Works Centre for Wellbeing.

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