

Beyond Distance

Rethinking accessibility to parks for Bristol and Bath's different ethnic groups.

An overview of evidence and recommendations.

January 2026
Your Park Bristol and Bath

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PARK



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Introduction

About us

Your Park Bristol & Bath is an independent charity making parks the heart of healthier, more connected communities. We bring people, councils and partners together to run projects and improve parks so that everyone can benefit from them, no matter their background or circumstances.

Our work ranges from supporting mental health, improving accessibility, running volunteering days, to helping local people shape changes in their own parks and green spaces.

We believe parks should be for everyone. Yet across our region we see that access is far from equal. That's why we partnered with the University of Bath to carry out research exploring what really shapes park use for people from ethnic minority backgrounds in Bristol.

This report

This public report shares a summary of the findings from research in partnership with the University of Bath, and provides practical actions councils, planners, park managers and communities can take right now.

The terminology used in this report follows the guidance of the UK Office for Equality and Opportunity.

This study represents a shared effort to improve understanding of who our parks work for and, crucially, who they exclude.

The recommendations in this report have national and international relevance, with similar barriers reported globally.

These recommendations will help planners and decision makers work with different communities to design parks and green spaces that work for them.



Acknowledgements

This work was only possible by the generosity and insight of residents across Bristol and Bath who shared their experiences of parks and green spaces, particularly those from ethnic minority communities whose voices have too often been missing from national conversations about access.

We are grateful to the 295 participants who took part in surveys, focus groups and design workshops. Their honesty, reflections and lived experience shaped every finding and recommendation in this report.

Our thanks go to:

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- Bristol City Council and the University of Bath for funding the development of this research.

- Community leaders and local organisations who supported recruitment and hosted discussions including Wellspring Settlement, Malcolm X Community Centre, Caafi Health and the BNSSG Health Network.
- Everyone who contributed perspectives, feedback and guidance throughout this process.

Academic journal

This summary report is based on: 'Redefining accessibility: uncovering physical, cultural, and emotional barriers to urban green space accessibility.'

Credits: Zina Abdulla, Dima Albadra, Nick McCullen, Sophia Hatzisavvidou, Charlee Bennett, published Dec 2025.

The full report is openly accessible via [npj Urban Sustainability](https://doi.org/10.1089/urban.2025.0001).



Summary

For years, accessibility has been defined by how close someone lives to a park¹¹⁻¹². This research proposes that distance alone tells only a fraction of the story. Many people live close to a green space yet still feel unable, unwelcome or unsafe to use it¹⁹⁻²¹.

Through surveys, focus groups and a participatory design workshop with people from diverse ethnic minority communities in Bristol, the study reveals that accessibility is shaped just as much by cultural visibility, safety, maintenance and social experience as by physical infrastructure.

Alongside the evidence of specific barriers communities experience, the research identifies a new three tier framework for understanding accessibility. The framework includes basic needs, emotional needs and the ability to use parks in culturally meaningful ways.

The findings present a clear opportunity for local authorities who, by designing parks with and for the communities who should use them, can create parks and green spaces that improve health, strengthen neighbourhoods and support environmental goals.

Why this matters

Urban parks and green spaces support physical and mental health, reduce loneliness and strengthen communities¹⁻⁹, but access to and use of parks is unequal.

One in three people nationally still lack a green space within a 15 minute walk, and even where parks are nearby they are not always accessible or welcoming to everyone³⁰.

The study shows the consequences of this gap. Ethnic minority residents in Bristol live closer to parks on average than white residents, yet are around 40 percent less likely to use them²². This difference isn't about distance. It is about people's real experiences, expectations and the way parks are designed that affect how they are used.

“Bristol is sectorised, I don’t feel comfortable in the mainly white areas.”



About the study

Your Park Bristol & Bath and the University of Bath worked together to answer a simple question with far reaching implications:

What stops people from using their local park, even when it is close to home?

To explore this, the research combined three strands:

- Survey of 243 residents across Bristol.
- Focus groups with 42 participants from diverse ethnic minority backgrounds.
- Participatory design workshop with 10 participants testing solutions at Netham Park.

The focus groups were held in the areas in Bristol where people use parks the least. This is to make sure we heard the voices of people who are least likely to use parks yet could benefit the most.

Full methodology and the complete report is openly accessible via [npj Urban Sustainability](#).

What we learned

Accessibility is about more than distance

Many participants lived within walking distance of a park but still felt they could not use it. Emotional, cultural, social and physical barriers shaped their decisions more strongly than location.

People described:

- Feeling unsafe.
- Feeling unwelcome or judged.
- Broken or missing facilities.
- A lack of activities that are “for them”.
- A lack of infrastructure that matches how they use parks socially.

This shows that focusing solely on quantity and location of parks misses important barriers that prevent use.

“I’ve faced racial comments in Bedminster. During lockdown we were called racial names”.

Parks are used differently by different communities

The research found clear differences in how communities use parks:

- People from ethnic minority backgrounds often visit in groups, with friends or family for food and shared activities.
- White participants were more likely to visit alone or with a dog.

Most parks are designed around individual or dog-based use rather than the collective ways many communities want to enjoy parks and green spaces.

This means people can feel unintentionally excluded.

Feeling unwelcome is a power barrier

Experiences of racial hostility, fear of judgement or causing conflict for gathering in groups were repeated themes. There is little cultural representation and very few community events that reflect different cultures.

Even subtle signals shape whether someone feels a park is “for them”.

Dogs are a major concern for some communities

Fear of dogs was one of the strongest and most consistent barriers identified, especially among participants of Pakistani descent.

Children with autism and older adults also found dog encounters distressing.

This included fear of dogs off-lead, dog litter and past negative interactions.

“I don’t want to die! I’m scared of dogs and needles! I don’t want to get the injection if I get bitten. And I am old, and I cannot run away. I like parks but I never go. I’m too scared.”



Safety concerns affect everyone

Fear of anti social behaviour, poor lighting, few exits, teen gangs, previous incidents of violence or harassment and a lack of visible staff were common across all groups regardless of ethnicity.

Women, girls and their carers described safety concerns that affected them more strongly and stopped them from visiting parks alone or after dark.

“Drug dealing everywhere and bad lighting. Drug dealing in front of kids”.

Maintenance matters more than you think

Cleanliness, working toilets, safe equipment and cared-for paths aren't extras. They set the tone of whether a park feels safe, welcoming and trustworthy, as well as whether the surrounding community feels valued.

Poor maintenance was strongly linked to a sense of inequality. Cleanliness and hygiene are especially important for some ethnic minority groups due to cultural and religious reasons.

“Nothing gets done to fix the equipment and I am sick of the inequality.”

Parks lack facilities for those other than children

Many parks were seen as designed only for young children. Older children, particularly girls, felt excluded from play and sports areas dominated by boys.

Basic amenities are missing where they are needed most

The access to clean and accessible toilets, sociable seating and refreshments were the most important amenities for everyone. However, a lack of these amenities along with a lack of shaded areas and accessible paths has a disproportionate impact on Disabled people, older adults and families.

Recommendations

The recommendations below come from the research findings and the solutions developed with participants through the participatory design workshop.

Because the barriers are complex and people's experiences differ, this list does not cover everything and will need to be reviewed and updated regularly with others.

This creates a strong opportunity to build on existing relationships and work with the communities involved to understand overlapping experiences, improve access to parks and make positive change.



Improve safety and visibility

- Increase lighting in and around key routes.
- Keep sightlines open by managing vegetation
- Install CCTV where appropriate.
- Provide visible, approachable staff or wardens.
- Ensure safety measures are inclusive and non-intimidating for minoritised groups.



Create inclusive spaces for families and groups

- Install large picnic tables, circular seating and shelters.
- Provide BBQ areas with durable surfaces.
- Support low-cost or free booking for cultural or community events.
- Use design and signage to clearly signal that group use is welcome.
- Fix and replace play equipment.



Address the impact of dogs

- Introduce clearly defined dog-free zones.
- Review off-lead policies where cultural unfamiliarity creates barriers.
- Increase dog waste bins and enforcement.
- Provide community-focused education about dog behaviour where relevant.





Invest in facilities for teens and girls

- Increase lighting in and around key routes.
- Keep sightlines open by managing vegetation.
- Introduce a range of play options for different age groups.
- Involve teenagers, especially girls in decisions about parks.



Improve cleanliness and maintenance

- Increase lighting in and around key routes.
- Keep sight-lines open by managing vegetation.
- Fine park users for littering.
- Provide more and larger bins.
- Provide visible, approachable staff or wardens.
- Ensure safety measures are inclusive and non-intimidating for minoritised groups.



Make local parks worth visiting

- Prioritise investment in underserved neighbourhoods.
- Add planting, flowers and nature zones to improve aesthetics.
- Develop seasonal programmes and creative interventions.
- Install community art or landmarks that foster pride.



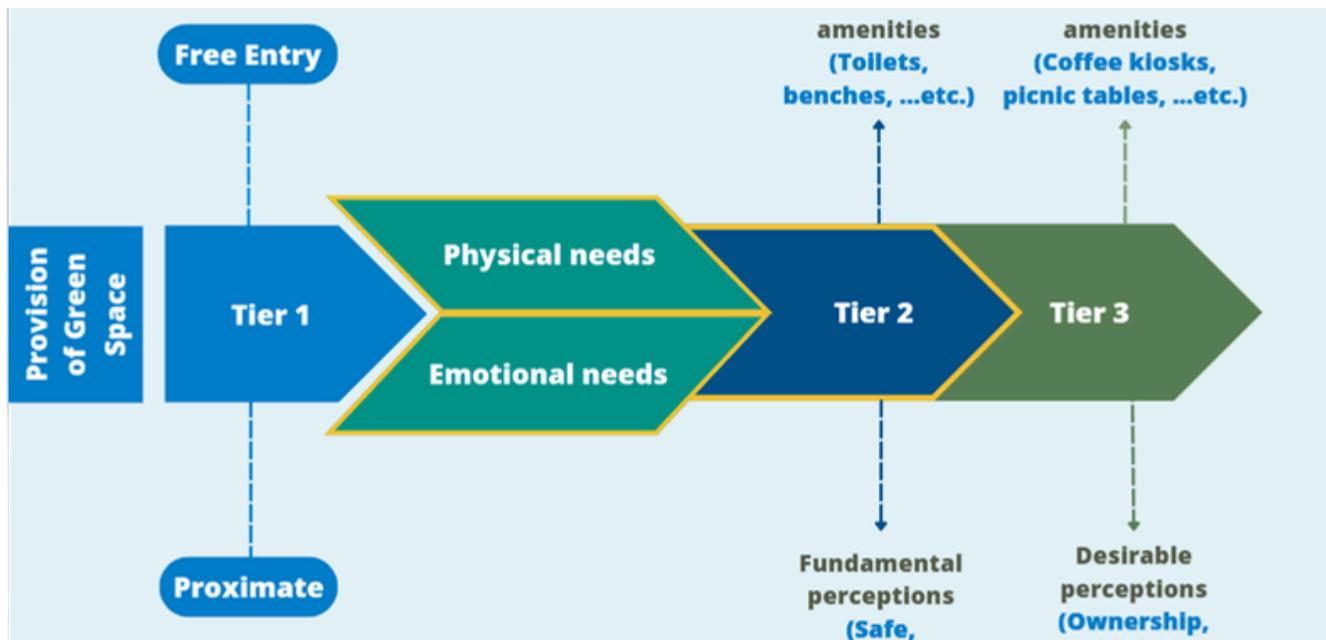
Strengthen community ownership

- Simplify event booking processes.
- Reinvest event income directly into local parks.
- Use participatory planning for upgrades.
- Support community-led stewardship and programming.



Redefining accessibility

The research shows that accessibility is much more than how far someone lives from a park. It proposes a new three-tier framework that will meet physical, social, cultural and emotional needs.



Tier 1: Provision

Parks must meet basic planning standards for provision. This includes being reachable on foot and free to access.

Tier 2: Basic needs

For a park to be usable in practice, it must support physical and emotional safety. These needs determine whether someone feels comfortable using the space:

- Clean, functioning toilets.
- Reliable lighting and good visibility.
- Regular maintenance and litter management.
- Seating that is comfortable and accessible.
- Pathways that allow easy movement for people with mobility needs.
- A sense of welcome, including freedom from hostility, discrimination or intimidation.

Tier 3: Social and cultural needs

For a park to be truly accessible, people must feel they can use it in ways that reflect their culture, family life and community identity:

- Group seating, picnic areas and BBQ spaces.
- Play and activity spaces for teenagers and girls.
- Outdoor gyms and multi-generational features.
- Culturally relevant or community-led events.
- Quiet areas, nature spaces and areas for wellbeing.
- Design cues that reflect local communities and signal belonging.

Call for action

Park access is not just about distance. People can live near a park and still feel unsafe, unwelcome or unable to use it in ways that matter to them. Improving access means investing in quality, safety and cultural relevance and will have a significant impact for communities where creating new parks is not possible.

What needs to happen next

Adopt the three tier accessibility framework

Use the framework to guide planning and investment, making sure basic provision and safety are in place before moving to social and cultural use.

Invest in quality and safety

Prioritise lighting, cleanliness, toilets, seating and visible staff. These shape whether people feel safe and welcome.

Work in partnership to remove key barriers

Partner with organisations like Your Park Bristol & Bath and communities to tackle the most significant barriers identified in this research, from safety concerns to lack of culturally inclusive spaces.

Trial solutions with communities

Test practical changes in target neighbourhoods, working with local communities to trial, learn and refine solutions before scaling them.

Target investment where need is greatest

Focus resources on areas where barriers are highest, park use is lowest and the potential for impact through increased park use most significant.

Commit to ongoing review

Accessibility is not fixed. Regular review with communities with lived experience is essential.

National policy

The findings show that better park access is not only about creating more parks. It is about improving quality, safety and making parks feel relevant to the communities who use them. These lessons are useful for cities across the UK and beyond.



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>Your Park Bristol & Bath
PO Box 7302
Bristol
BS5 8AA

access@yourpark.org.uk

yourpark.org.uk

/YourParkBB

@YourParkBB

@YourParkBB

/YourParkBB



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