Forest Research

Social interaction, inclusion and community cohesion

Introduction

Green infrastructure (GI) can help bring people together, engaging individuals from different social groupings that may not normally interact. Green space offers possibilities: increasing social activity, improving community cohesion, developing local attachment and lowering crime levels, particularly in deprived communities (Bell *et al.*, 2008; Weldon *et al.*, 2007). Certain groups in society are particularly vulnerable to social exclusion: people with disabilities, ethnic minorities, young people, older people and those at an economic disadvantage; for these groups, the potential that green space has for enhancing social cohesion is especially pertinent.

Benefits

Benefits include: improved social capital; reduction in crime; and an increase in social interaction, activity and inclusion, bringing with it enhanced community cohesion.

Economic evidence

The table below shows the estimated potential cost savings in England and Wales from an increase in community cohesion once adjusted for assumptions (DCLG, 2009: 8). Even after adjustments, however, there are many caveats to these estimates:

Table from DCLG, 2009: Estimated potential cost savings in England and Wales after adjusting the assumptions on marginal impact of community cohesion on crime levels.								
	Low estimate			**Mid-estimate**		**High estimate**		
Crime type	**Decrease in crime**	**Decrease in crime level**	**Potential cost saving (£)**	**Decrease in crime level**	**Potential cost saving (£)**	**Decrease in crime level**	**Potential cost saving (£)**	
Violent crime	1%	13 556	156,000,000	25 079	289,000,000	36 601	422,000,000	
Burglary in a dwelling	1%	6 142	22,000,000	12 283	44,000,000	18 425	67,000,000	
Theft of vehicle	1%	1 346	6,000,000	3 365	15,000,000	5 384	25,000,000	
Theft from vehicle	1%	8 918	8,000,000	13 378	13,000,000	17 837	17,000,000	
Total			193,000,000		361,000,000		530,000,000	

* Mid-estimates calculated as the mid-point between the original estimate and the low estimate.
Note: figures may not sum due to rounding.

Evidence linked to: social inclusion and community cohesion

1. Green space and social interaction:
Green space offers possibilities in terms of increasing social activity, improving community cohesion, developing local attachment and lowering crime levels, particularly in deprived communities (Bell et al., 2008; Weldon et al., 2007).

- Sullivan *et al*. (2004) found that 83% more individuals engaged in social activity in green spaces as opposed to sparsely vegetated or concreted ones.

- A study by Cohen *et al*. (2008) found there was a positive association between neighbourhood features such as parks and 'collective efficacy' or the ability of residents to interact positively.

- Dawson *et al*. (2006) undertook a national evaluation of the Walking the Way to Health Initiative (a volunteer-led scheme co-ordinated by the British Heart Foundation and Natural England), surveying 750 people. They found that for many participants the social benefits that the walks provided were as important as the exercise.

2. Social inclusion and community cohesion:
Evidence shows that green spaces can bring people together, creating community cohesion, as people from different social groupings engage with each other.

- An epidemiological study by Kim and Kaplan (2004, cited in Tzoulas *et al*., 2007: 170) suggested that open spaces and natural features play an important role in the attachment of people to the area they live in and the local community, and have an effect on their interactions with other residents.

- Sullivan (2005, cited in Davies and Deaville 2008: 12) undertook a study looking at strength of community, domestic violence and crime on a housing estate. Social ties were found to be stronger the greener the neighbourhood, overall reported domestic violence levels were lower in greener areas, and crime levels were significantly lower in residencies near natural spaces. The author suggested that green space may encourage social interaction which, in turn, increases social ties and decreases aggression.

Other studies have considered ethnicity and race in relation to green space:

- Ravenscroft and Markwell (2000) investigated the relationship between park provision in Reading, UK and social inclusion among urban youths. They found that parks are more accessible to youths from ethnic minorities than other types of leisure facility.

- Bell *et al*. (2008: 34) cite a study undertaken by Gobster (1998) focusing on Warren Park in Chicago, which formed a boundary between very different neighbourhoods. The author concluded that it was a successful space in terms of serving the diverse neighbourhoods around it and thus provided evidence that parks and green spaces do not (or do not have to) form barriers between different communities.

Practical considerations

Access is a key factor to consider in relation to green space and its social and community value, since distance to urban green space is associated with levels of use (Giles-Corti *et al.*, 2005; Kaczynski and Henderson, 2007; Neuvonen *et al.*, 2007; Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution, 2007). As a result, Natural England (2009) have developed the *Accessible Natural Greenspace Standard* (ANGSt) which sets benchmarks for access to green space.

However, proximity to green space alone cannot explain levels of usage. Green spaces also need to be accessible (i.e. have good, affordable public transport links, good access points away from busy roads). The GI approach is an important element of tackling accessibility since it is a networking approach, concerned with the connectivity of green spaces, which can aid movement through landscape.

The facilities available within green spaces also impact upon usage. For example, green spaces with a variety of attractive attributes such as landscaped features, ponds, trees and lakes can encourage higher levels of use (Giles-Corti *et al.*, 2005). Green spaces also need to facilitate diverse uses since single-use spaces, such as sports fields, do not encourage undedicated use (Croucher *et al.*, 2007). Where one green space site cannot accommodate all users or serve a full range of purposes, the GI approach can prove vital because it can enhance the wider spread of green space provision in an area as a whole (Urban Green Spaces Task Force, 2002).

It is important to understand the motivations and barriers to green space use among different groups in society, since the design of public green infrastructure for social integration must take into account the needs of all potential users. Therefore, community engagement is a vital component of the planning and implementation processes for green infrastructure.

In addition, as Weldon *et al.* (2007) note, a capacity building approach, whereby local people take greater 'ownership' of green spaces can help improve the state and use of green space, especially amongst young people. If green spaces that are located within residential areas, are made accessible and promote social interaction they will encourage public use. This, in turn, can have the effect of stimulating local stewardship which can help with the maintenance of a site. Furthermore, the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution (2007) suggests that fears and concerns over safety can be reduced if local residents are involved in site management. Led and supported activities run by organisations or volunteers can be an effective means of engaging with hard to reach groups who may lack confidence in accessing green infrastructure or may feel unsafe when accessing these spaces alone.

Links to climate change

There are some tentative links between the potential community and social value of GI and climate change. These links lie in the fact that stronger more cohesive communities are likely to be more resistant to change and the adaptations required to address climate change (Donoghue and Sturtevant, 2007: 907). Furthermore, spending more time in nature and developing attachments to green space may promote environmental awareness and encourage more environmentally minded actions and a greater sense of responsibility and stewardship, which could in turn contribute to tackling climate change (O'Brien *et al.*, 2008).

Tools

Public Benefits Recording System (PBRS)
http://www.pbrs.org.uk/
PBRS is a tool originally conceived by the Forestry Commission and the Northwest Regional Development Agency to help with the selection of derelict land sites for regeneration in the Newlands land reclamation scheme. The PBRS uses GIS to identify synergies between social, environmental and economic needs and opportunities, strategies and investments to ensure value added results.

Social outcomes through Investment in Forestry Tool (SIFT)
http://www.forestry.gov.uk/forestry/INFD-7KDHQJ
SIFT was originally developed to help Forestry Commission Scotland make decisions about prioritising investments in woodland management and creation for social benefits. It is a spatial tool using GIS datasets which are assigned scores according to their relative potential benefit. These scores are then combined and analysed in relation to specific locations using GIS.

Social Return on Investment SROI
- http://www.sroi-uk.org/component/option,com_docman/task,doc_view/gid,53/Itemid,38/
- http://www.greenspacescotland.org.uk/upload/File/Greenlink%20SROI%20Final%20report%205%20October%202009.pdf

SROI is a framework for measuring and communicating a broad concept of value, incorporating social, environmental and economic costs and benefits. The framework concentrates on change and measures outcomes using monetary values to represent them. Nevertheless, SROI is about value, as opposed to money; monetary figures are simply used because they are a widely accepted way of conveying value.

Case studies

Biodiversity and Access Project (BAP), Sefton
http://www.merseyforest.org.uk/inclusion.pdf

Cydcoed, Wales
http://www.forestresearch.gov.uk/pdf/Cydcoed_final_report_Jan09.pdf/

Gibson Street, Otago Street and Westbank Quadrant backcourts (GOW), Glasgow
http://www.greenspacescotland.org.uk/upload/File/GOW%20report.pdf

Manor and Castle Green Estate, Sheffield
http://www.cabe.org.uk/case-studies/manor-and-castle-green-estate
http://www.neighbourhoodsgreen.org.uk/ng/casestudies/conference/sheffieldWildlife3.asp

Woods for All
http://www.reforestingscotland.org/projects/woods_for_all.php

Knowledge gaps

No tangible data exist on the costs/economic value of green space or green space interventions in respect of community cohesion and social inclusion.

There is a knowledge gap in terms of economic evidence which supports the social and community value potential of GI but it is very difficult to attach monetary values to such benefits. Bell *et al*. (2008: 34) observe that there is a very small number of studies which look specifically at the use of green space by different ethnic groups and, furthermore, gender, ageing and disability all receive limited attention. This is especially true in terms of UK-based studies, as many studies of this type originate from the US.

Citations of national policies/priorities

Strong and Prosperous Communities 2006
http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/localgovernment/strongprosperous

Public Service Agreement 21: Build more cohesive, empowered and active communities 2007
http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/d/pbr_csr07_psa21.pdf

Communities in control: Real people, real power 2008
http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/communities/communitiesincontrol

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