



Health in Parks

This guidance will help you to use parks to deliver greater health benefits for your communities. These steps are not entirely linear (it's likely you'll need to repeat or revisit some) and all are important to have in place to maximise the health potential of your green spaces and reach those who will benefit most.

1. Undertake an assessment of the physical and social infrastructure of your green spaces

It's important to understand and assess how the physical infrastructure in your green spaces is currently helping people to improve their health and wellbeing and what is missing or could be improved upon. For example: benches, picnic areas, outdoor gyms, wild areas, footpaths and cycle routes. The councils of Camden and Islington commissioned an audit of their parks to identify how well the infrastructure supported people to be active outdoors and connect with nature.

Likewise, you need to work out and understand the barriers which might be preventing different communities from using the green spaces. These barriers can be highly localised and can include proximity, physical obstacles, transport, lack of facilities and social barriers, such as perceptions of safety, a lack of awareness or low confidence.

2. Look at the health data

To understand your local community and their needs, look at health data and health inequalities data and identify who would benefit most from accessing parks and green spaces to improve their health. This information can inform strategic planning and help you to make decisions on where to target interventions to maximise the health benefits of parks and green spaces.

3. Get to know your local communities

This will be different for every community that you work with, but involves forming relationships with local communities and any intermediary organisations in order to:

- Map what work and activities they're already doing to help reduce health inequalities and improve health and wellbeing.
- Understand what different communities need and want and work together on how to maximise this.

Camden and Islington engaged an external agency to support the delivery of this work. They did this through surveys, workshops, interviews and mapping. For more information on how to build communities, visit our communities resource.

4. Navigate the health system

It is important to understand how your health sector is structured in order to make the most of these relationships and to form partnerships. This can differ across the UK, but your internal public health team can help with this, as well as partners from other health organisations. Volunteering and community sector (VCS) organisations and groups are often commissioned to deliver health and social care provision, so they can also provide a vital partnership and connection into the health and care system.

This work can take a while, so it's worth factoring in substantial time and resources for it. Camden and Islington worked with the Public Health team, Clinical Commissioning Group, Primary Care Networks, GP link workers and VCS link workers. Delivering green social prescribing in particular relies on strong links with link workers in your local area.

5. Activate your green spaces

It is important that parks are active spaces to enable opportunities for people to improve their health. If you are planning to deliver a green social prescribing service, there needs to be activities for link workers to prescribe people to. You can deliver these yourself or work with partners who use the park as a venue.

These activities should be co-designed by organisations from the health and VCSE sectors as well as residents and those that manage the parks and green spaces. Talk to colleagues from Public Health, existing partners, local VCSE organisations and GP practices to work out who needs to be involved.

For Camden and Islington, this included the Clinical Commissioning Group, local GPs, NHS Mental Health Trust, the Public Health team, Adult and Children's Social Care, Age UK, Voluntary Action Camden and Voluntary Action Islington, and friends of groups. They ran three discussion sessions that led to the development of fifteen activity proposals, some that the council was already delivering or could deliver, and some that external groups would run.

It is sensible to pilot and evaluate these activities to understand if they are effective and to consider how you might improve and develop them.

6. Empower your communities

Work to empower and support your communities to deliver activities within your green spaces. Let them know that parks can be venues and spaces for what they are already doing or would love to do.

The councils of Camden and Islington achieved this by doing three simple things:

- Providing seed funding to community groups to support the setting up of activities;
- Creating a simple process to enable communities to register their activities with the council; and
- Providing guidance to support and encourage the delivery of activities – for example, by developing a walking tour guide.

7. Market your parks

Some communities, groups and individuals will need less support to access parks and benefit from spending time in them. For them, just knowing more about where the parks are and what they have to offer, what facilities exist and feeling as though they would be safe and welcome, will be enough to encourage a visit or more visits.

Camden and Islington commissioned a marketing campaign and collateral targeting these audiences.

8. Invest in your workforce

Your parks and green space teams on the ground are key to unlocking health benefits for your communities. It is important to make sure they have the skills, confidence, culture and capacity to do this work. This will require time and some investment. Camden and Islington have invested heavily in culture and confidence and are running training in community engagement, supporting volunteers and developing walking tours.

They have also created new roles in order to take on additional responsibilities, including a Communications Officer, a Fundraising Officer and a Partnership Manager. You may want to consider doing the same or work out who within existing teams might be able to take on these roles.

9. Make the case for investment

We know parks provide health benefits, but it is important to calculate the real economic value of your green estate (not just the maintenance cost or income generated) to demonstrate the high benefit:cost ratio and develop a clear narrative to communicate the vital nature of this work. This will make the case for financial support and further investment.

Camden and Islington did this by commissioning a natural capital assessment of the value of their parks and green spaces. Additionally, they also reviewed the literature on the social benefits and evaluated their pilot activities. Together this has helped them to make a compelling case to decision makers. It resulted in budget protection for staff to continue to deliver the Parks for Health work and in the future will likely unlock further funding. New partnerships have also created additional capacity.

10. Embed within wider strategy

To ensure this work has corporate and strategic support and to help make a wider cultural shift towards parks as health assets, it is important to ensure it is embedded within strategic documents within different departments in your organisation or in similar documents published by Health and VCSE sector bodies. Camden and Islington's green space teams worked with Public Health to create a Parks for Health Strategy and also set out to get it embedded within other key documents.

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