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A systematic review of interventions in community infrastructure (places and spaces) to boost social relations and community wellbeing

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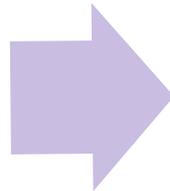
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Systematic review: review questions

- 1: How **effective** are interventions designed to improve community infrastructure (places & spaces) in improving social relations and/ or community wellbeing?
- 2: What **factors (positive and negative) affect** the implementation or effectiveness of the interventions?
- 3: What are people's **subjective experiences** of interventions designed to improve infrastructure (in relation to social relations and community wellbeing)?

21337 records
screened



51 studies
included

Community infrastructure: definition

- ✓ Public places and 'bumping' places designed for people to meet
e.g. streets, squares, parks, play areas, village halls community centres.
- ✓ Places where people meet informally or are used as meeting places
e.g. cafes, pubs, libraries, schools & churches.
- ✓ Services that can facilitate access to places to meet
e.g. urban design, landscape architecture, public art, transport, public health organisations.

Definition of outcomes

Community wellbeing

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 & Brasher 2008)

Social relations

Connections with people around us = an important determinant of individual & community wellbeing, leading to social values such as trust in others & social cooperation (Evans, 2015)

Intervention categories

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Community hubs (9)

Community centres or community anchor organisations focused on health and wellbeing that can be either locality based or work as a network [...] typically provide multiple activities and services that address health or the wider determinants of health, most of which are open to the wider community (PHE & NHSE 2015).



Community hubs: review findings

- May promote **social cohesion** through the mixing of different social or age or generational groups. Examples: men's sheds (promoting mixing of social groups); community gardens (promoting intergenerational mixing).
- May increase **social capital** and build **trust** between people in communities, increase wider **social networks and interaction** between community members. Examples: churches, community cafes, community gardens and co-housing projects.
- May increase **sense of pride** in the local area. Examples: community-led changes in rural settings; community gardens, and a co-housing site.
- May increase **civic participation**: community garden initiative.
- May increase individuals' **knowledge or skills**. Examples: a community café, a men's shed and a community garden.

Community hubs: Review findings

“Each spring, newcomers to the garden express social awkwardness toward those they do not know, since everyone is focused on getting their hands in the dirt. But over time, that shyness falls away and people who might never have social contact with each other begin to talk and socialise as gardening for food security gives way to expressions of leisure” (Porter and McIlvaine-Newsad 2013)

“I believe I have learned new skills and like doing so. The whole thing has been fun. It has been a good way to pass time. Men need to feel good about themselves and this is a good way to feel good. When I left work I felt ‘closed up’, since coming to the shed things have improved. I feel more comfortable and relaxed” (Fildes et al. 2010, p. 237)

Neighbourhood design (16)

The scale, form or function of buildings and open space. Good neighbourhood design can have an important role in promoting community cohesion by providing public spaces that are comfortable and inviting for local people



Neighbourhood design: review findings

- May increase **social cohesion** by bringing together people from different ages and social backgrounds. Examples: master planned community; local urban renewal.
- Has potential to improve **social relations**. Examples: street play; community-led urban renewal; master planned community.
- **Street redesign** to allow more active forms of travel, such as cycling and walking, may improve **social relations**. Examples: cycling infrastructure improvements; master planned community; improved walkability.
- May positively affect **sense of belonging and pride** in a community, and **perceptions about the attractiveness** of the area.
- May increase **civic activity, physical activity**, as well as other **health benefits**.
- May lead to community members **feeling safer** .

Neighbourhood design: Review findings

“I have connected more through riding a bike than I ever had by driving a car, and I meet more neighbours who ride bikes ... it’s a very community-based driven activity because it gets people moving” (Crane et al. 2016, p. 53).

“I reckon it was well worth it. When you come out your house now, you look at it and you think ‘Gosh, this is lovely, isn’t it?’”(F, 5/06, Coulson et al. 2011, p. 305)

The glass corridors! Community depends on informal life, and the weather here wouldn't permit such social life without the corridors. [...] Meeting in the corridor, we have different, less formal rules of conduct than in the house. ... We leave our doors unlocked here, as we did on the farm ... and we never lock the front door to the whole scheme ... (Peder, 30s, resident)”.

Events (11)

Temporary events that took place at 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: Review findings

- May improve **social relations** by providing a 'hub' for people to meet. Examples: a pop-up park, an annual indigenous festival, a balloon fiesta, and small scale rural festivals.
- May improve **social cohesion** by providing a neutral space for different groups to socialise. Examples: temporary street closures, an annual indigenous festival, community-led festivals, and small scale rural festivals.
- May increase **sense of pride** in the local area. Examples: a balloon fiesta, small scale rural festivals, a large Sunday market, an indigenous festival, community-led festivals.
- May provide opportunities to **connect to place-based culture or heritage**. Examples: an annual indigenous festival, small scale rural festivals.
- May increase engagement in **civic activity**. Examples: a large Sunday market, a community-led festival, a pop-up park and an indigenous festival.

Events: review findings

“there is little doubt that the Annual Sports and Cultural festival recognizes indigenous diversity and difference [...] it celebrates the idea that ‘indigenous culture has a strong cultural element to it so it’s important that community people are engaging in that and that it is showcased’”

(Whitford and Ruhanen 2013, p. 54)

“Participants expressed excitement about being part of such a vibrant community, while pedestrian activists celebrated their commitment to making Kensington Market into a space for creative, communal, interactive interventions”

(McLean and Rahder 2013, p. 98).

Green and blue space (14)

Any natural green space (e.g. parks, woodland, gardens) or blue space (e.g. rivers, canals, coast).



Green & blue space: Review findings

- Green and blue space interventions that provide the opportunity to participate in activities or meetings can improve **social interactions**.
- May increase **social cohesion** by encouraging mixing of different cultural and socioeconomic groups.
- May lead to increased **social networks, social interactions and bonding and bridging social capital**.
- May improve **family wellbeing** by providing something for families to do together.
- Are associated with increased **civic activity**.
- May result in **positive behavioural change**, encouraging physical activity and healthy eating.
- May lead to improved **mental wellbeing, skills and knowledge**.

Green & blue space: Review findings

“People feel this belongs to them and we have encouraged this feeling of “we planted it, we look after it”, and that’s a very strong feeling. ... And the children, to hear them talk about it, “I’ve been up to my woodland.” We have worked to foster that ... It was quite deliberate, and necessarily so. Because that awareness can evaporate frighteningly easily and has to be worked out and maintained. The awareness of the ownership of the woodland. You can’t take it for granted. [interview 16]”
(Lawrence et al. 2010, p. 129)

“Community Spaces has contributed to all these factors, primarily through its programme of capacity building which has seen stronger groups, partnerships and volunteers more able to play a full role in civic life”
(Shipway 2016, p. 20)

Alternative use of space (11)

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'.



Alternative use of space: Review findings

- May improve **social interactions and opportunities for social interactions.**
- May increase **opportunities for interaction between people from different ethnic or social groups.**
- May lead to increased **civic activity.**
- May lead to **positive behavioural change** in terms of physical activity and diet.

Alternative use of space: Review findings

“... members talked about their activities as an attempt to defy gentrification by creatively activating the neighbourhood’s streets. They believed that by transforming parking spots into croquet and Scrabble games, turning intersections into public squares, and placing a piano in traffic to make music and block cars, they were, as one resident put it, creating a cultural playground” (McLean and Rahder 2013, p. 98)

“Those who successfully joined to exchange a bond were often all smiles. The businesses were also all smiles when they exchanged the bonds for real dollars” (Stokes 2015, p. 38).

Placemaking (9)

Relates to the role of arts, culture and heritage in helping to shape the places where we live (Local Government Association, 2017).



Placemaking: Review findings

- May enhance community **social relations** and **social cohesion** through bonding or bridging social capital (LOW strength evidence).
- May enhance **sense of belonging, pride and perceptions of community attractiveness** (LOW strength evidence).
- May increase **civic activity** (LOW strength evidence).
- May have positive **economic impact** *e.g. tourism* (LOW strength evidence).
- May improve individuals' **physical activity and mental health** (LOW strength evidence).

Placemaking: Review findings

“On reflecting on their modified intersection with the added interactive art features, residents reported: It is a wonderful and great community builder because it gives people the sense of ownership of their neighbourhood...” (Semenza and March 2009, p. 32).

“While the original resident-planners felt strongly about blending architecturally into this new suburb, they felt ambivalent about the issue of welcoming outsiders to pass through the community. A compromise was reached whereby a footpath from the street to a local park runs along the west edge of the community. It is subtly located so as to run by, but not through, the large shared garden” (Cooper et al. 2000).

Urban regeneration (11)

The process of improving derelict or dilapidated districts of a city, typically through redevelopment (Oxford English Dictionary, 2018)



Urban regeneration: Review findings

- May improve **perceptions of attractiveness** of area (LOW strength evidence).
- May **improve local economy** (LOW strength evidence).
- May increase **civic participation** (LOW strength evidence).
- May **reduce crime or fear of crime** (LOW strength evidence).
- May improve **depression** (LOW strength evidence).
- May lead to **positive behaviour change** (LOW strength evidence).
- May lead to **improved knowledge and skills** (LOW strength evidence).

Community development (7)

A long-term value based process which aims to address imbalances in power and bring about change founded on social justice, equality and inclusion (FCDL, 2009).



Community development: Review findings

- May increase opportunities for **social interaction between different ethnic and age groups.**
- May increase **social capital** in the community.
- May lead to increased **civic participation.**
- May lead to **individual behaviour change** in terms of physical activity and healthy eating.
- May lead to **improved knowledge and skills** among community members.

Unwanted outcomes

Negative perceptions:

- Changes to neighbourhood design can create new problems or move existing ones;
- Activities targeting specific groups may have negative effect on wider community cohesion.

Unintended exclusion:

- Events celebrating a local community;
- Neighbourhood design;
- Temporary change of use of space;
- Community development projects;
- Urban regeneration.

Lack of effect on social relations:

Top-down urban renewal projects.

Conclusions: People

- **Social cohesion** – bringing together different social or generational groups
- **Social interactions** and
- **Sense of belonging/ pride/ community identity**

Are all increased by **activities** including:

- Temporary street pedestrianisation *e.g. Markets*
- Community gardening
- Changes to church services
- Events *e.g. festivals*
- Health related activities *e.g. guided walks in woodland, or exercise classes in community hubs*

Conclusions: Place

Community hubs



Social cohesion; Social capital;
Trust; Wider social networks &
interactions; Knowledge & skills.

Neighbourhood design



Sense of belonging & pride

Green & blue space + activities or meetings



Social interaction; Social
networks; Social capital;
Physical activity; Healthy eating;
Skills & knowledge

A **range** of approaches to community infrastructure can boost social relations & community wellbeing.

Evidence does not tell us which is best!

Conclusions: Power

Actions & challenges for local leaders making changes to places & spaces:

- **Accessible** in terms of ability, attitude, culture, finance, transport & location;
- **Involve** community members in organisation & planning;
- Be aware of potential for **unintended exclusion**;
- **Sustainable** – look at long term outcomes;
- **Marginalised groups** – remove barriers by providing group based activity or reason to interact.

Recommendations for research

- ❖ More high quality evaluations of interventions implemented in the UK (or that may be implemented in the UK in the future) are needed. In order to strengthen the evidence base, when a new community infrastructure intervention for boosting social relations is commissioned or introduced, it should be rigorously evaluated using robust methodology.
- ❖ Good quality evidence with regard to social relations and wellbeing outcomes is particularly lacking in the following categories: events; **place-making**; alternative use of space; **urban regeneration** and community development.

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