Green and blue space

Profile

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Contents

AI: Some information in our Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA) products may have been summarised with the help of artificial intelligence tools. Everything is carefully checked by our team to make sure it's accurate.

Overview

Green space definitions can be broad (non-manmade surfaces) or narrow (areas of vegetation available for the general public to use). Most include blue space (water) within the definition.

Green and blue spaces are not just amenities—they are essential infrastructure for health, wellbeing, and climate resilience. In Suffolk, as across the UK, the natural environment plays a vital role in shaping population health. Access to nature can support physical activity, reduce stress, improve mood, and foster social connection—benefits that are increasingly critical in the face of rising health inequalities, an ageing population, and the growing challenges of preventable long-term disease.

Although Suffolk is predominantly rural and has high levels of vegetation cover, much of this land is privately owned and farmed, making it less accessible than council-managed green spaces in towns and villages. However, Suffolk benefits from an extensive Rights of Way network totaling 3,500 miles, alongside significant areas of Open Access land, which together offer valuable opportunities for public access to the natural environment.

Defra are developing official statistics on access to green space in England, with seven different scenarios for households, depending on definitions. Suffolk analysis indicates:

- 94.7% Suffolk households have access to greenspace using scenario 2, which considers rural rights of way as accessible green space - the only scenario where access is statistically significantly higher than England (93.1%).
- Suffolk has statistically significantly lower access than England for all other scenarios, which measure the amount of accessible land and its proximity. This is most noticeable for scenario 5, Neighbourhood Accessible Natural Greenspace (accessible green spaces of at least 10 ha within 1 km or 15 minutes' walk from home). Less than one in four (24.6%) households in Suffolk meet this scenario, compared to almost a third (32.8%) in England as a whole.

The NHS 10-Year Plan calls for a fundamental shift from treating illness to preventing it, with stronger place-based partnerships and investment in community assets. Green and blue spaces are crucial to this vision. They offer low-cost, high-impact opportunities to promote physical and mental health, reduce demand on clinical services, and build healthier, more resilient communities.

Beyond individual and population health, green and blue spaces are vital for climate resilience. They can cool towns and cities, improve air quality, reduce flood risk, and help communities adapt to the challenges of a changing climate. As Suffolk responds to the climate emergency, nature-based solutions offer a powerful and practical way to protect both people and the planet.

The evidence is clear – investment in nature is an investment in health. By embedding the value of green and blue spaces into planning, policy, and service design, they have the potential to deliver on prevention, protect the environment, and secure a healthier future for Suffolk.

Related JSNA content

Suffolk's JSNA includes other information and reports that might be relevant to any consideration of green and blue space, its impact and use. Current content can be searched from the JSNA homepage.

Introduction

This Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA) profile aims to give an overview of the importance of green and blue space in relation to health and the wider determinants of health. Many definitions of green space and accessible land exist – this can significantly impact analysis. As a general overview, **green space** refers to areas covered with grass, trees, or other vegetation. These are natural or planted environments, usually found in cities and towns, and often describe planned or managed areas like parks, gardens, or greenways. While the term is most commonly used in urban or suburban settings, it can also apply to rural areas. **Blue space** refers to areas covered with water, which can be either natural or man-made.

Green and blue spaces form parts of nature—even when they are man-made—because they involve natural elements like vegetation and water that support ecosystems and human wellbeing.

Green and blue space is linked to a reduction in a range of mental and physical health conditions such as:

- high blood pressure (hypertension)
- stress levels and associated symptoms
- social isolation
- cardiovascular and respiratory problems
- diabetes and obesity
- Post-traumatic stress disorder and ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) symptoms - (when offered alongside therapeutic and mindfulness activities)
- Green and blue spaces can also improve health and wellbeing outcomes through increasing wellbeing (including subjective wellbeing and resilience) and happiness

In addition, 2017 research highlighted that for each £1 spent by local authorities and their partners on public parks, Londoners enjoy at least £27 in value. In 2024, the City of London Corporation commissioned Natural Capital Solutions to conduct a valuation study. This found that their open spaces are worth £282.6 million each year in benefits to society overall, and £8.1 billion over 50 years.

Language

When reading this profile, it is important to note that definitions of green and blue space have a significant impact. Depending how "green space" and "accessible" are defined, the percentage of households in England with access to green space varies between 5% and 93% according to the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Defra) data (May 2025).

There is no single agreed definition of green and blue spaces. A space may not be accessible to the public (private gardens, golf courses), may not be very "natural" (bowling greens, tennis courts), and may vary in size from an ornamental fountain to areas such as the sea.

Some example definitions are given below:

- Green space: "public parks or gardens, playing fields, play spaces, outdoor sports facilities bowling greens, cemeteries, golf courses, religious grounds, gardens allotments or community growing spaces, and tennis courts" (Ordnance Survey Open Greenspace)
- Accessible greenspace: "available for the general public to use free of charge and without time restrictions (although some sites may be closed to the public overnight and there may be fees for parking a vehicle)... areas of vegetation set within a landscape or townscape, often include blue space (i.e. lakes, rivers and wetlands)." (Green infrastructure standards for England, Natural England)
- Green infrastructure: "A network of multi-functional green and blue spaces and other natural features, urban and rural, which is capable of delivering a wide range of environmental, economic, health and wellbeing benefits for nature, climate, local and wider communities and prosperity" (National Planning Policy Framework, 2021)

- Blue space: “outdoor environments–either natural or manmade–that prominently feature water and are accessible to people. This can range from an ornamental fountain in an urban park to rivers, lakes and seas.” (BlueHealth Project)

Suffolk Nature Strategy

In the wider context of the natural environment, the Suffolk Nature Strategy was published in 2015 and outlines priorities and how the landscapes and wildlife in Suffolk contributes to economic growth and health and wellbeing. The strategy aims to influence decision-makers across public, private, and voluntary sectors, while also engaging the wider community. It emphasises that the natural environment is not only a source of beauty but a vital asset for prosperity and quality of life.

Structured around three core themes—**natural environment**, **economic growth**, and **health and wellbeing**—the strategy presents forward-looking and ambitious actions. It contributes to regional efforts to promote environmental stewardship. The strategy calls for shared responsibility and collective action, recognising that everyone has a role in caring for Suffolk’s natural assets.

Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS)

Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRSs) are a requirement of the Environment Act (2021). Suffolk County Council is the Responsible Authority for delivering Suffolk’s LNRS.

LNRSs form part of a new, nationwide approach to drive nature recovery across England. They focus on highlighting and revitalising natural habitats across Suffolk by:

- mapping the existing important areas for nature
- identifying and mapping the best locations and opportunities for nature recovery
- prioritising key species and habitats for recovery
- planning where and how to create new and connect existing habitats.

At the time of writing this document, the LNRS was still in development, a consultation on the draft document closed in June 2025.

Suffolk Green Access Strategy 2020-2030

The Suffolk Green Access Strategy outlines future plans for public rights of way in Suffolk.

Through the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, the government recognises the value of public rights of way and requires each highway authority to produce a Rights of Way Improvement Plan (ROWIP). The ROWIP contains a statement of the action Suffolk proposes to take for the management of public rights of way and for securing an improved network of routes.

The ROWIP assesses the:

- extent to which local rights of way meet the present and likely future needs of the public
- opportunities provided by local footpaths, cycle tracks, bridleways and byways for exercise and other forms of open-air recreation, and the enjoyment of the area
- accessibility of local rights of way to blind or partially sighted persons and others with mobility problems

The Suffolk Green Access Strategy details why green access is so relevant to Suffolk’s population and its visitors. It focuses on how green access can benefit quality of life and how it can contribute to the council’s corporate priorities. It explains the impact that green access can have on growing and managing tourism, how it delivers initiatives that impact on people’s physical and mental health, how it sits alongside *Creating The Greenest County* aspiration and why it offers cost savings in delivering council services and meeting corporate aims and objectives.

National data on accessing green space and nature

The Adults' People and Nature Survey for England (A-PaNS) is one of the main sources of data and statistics about how people in England experience and think about the environment. It has been collecting data monthly since April 2020. So far, data has been published that was collected between April 2020 and March 2024.

There is also a Children's People and Nature Survey for England (C-PaNS) providing information on how children and young people (aged 8 to 15) experience and think about the natural environment. It is run twice each year, once in term time and once in holiday time. Information below is based on data collected in 2024.

Suffolk level data is not available for these surveys, but this provides an insightful overview, and it is likely that some of the findings are applicable to the Suffolk population.

Children

The Children's People and Nature Survey for England (C-PaNS) 2024 found that 66% of children and young people had spent time in a garden in the previous week and 62% had been to a park / playing field or playground). The survey also found:

- 91% agreed that "being in nature makes me very happy" (1% disagreed, 8% ambivalent)
- 57% felt highly connected to nature (20% moderate connection, 23% low connection)
- 83% said looking after the environment was important to them
- 84% felt that their local green spaces were "easy to get to by walking"
- 79% "felt welcome there"
- 74% felt there were "lots of places for animals and birds to make their homes"
- 75% agreed there were "good spaces for playing"
- they said that playgrounds (31%) and good weather (26%) were the most important things to encourage them to go out into natural spaces more

Children and young people from households in the highest income group (£50,000 and over) were more likely to report spending time outside in their garden every day or most days (64%), compared to those from low-income households (55% <£15,000).

Children and young people from lower income households were significantly more likely to have no access to a garden (7% of children in households with income below £15,000, 4% of those with household income £15,000 - £49,999, compared to only 1% where household income was £50,000 or over).

93% of children whose ethnicity was Black or Black British were likely to have access to any private outdoor space (including shared garden or allotment), statistically significantly less than White (98%) or Mixed or multiple ethnicity (98%), and statistically similar to children with Asian or Asian British ethnicity (96%).

Adults

The Adult's People and Nature Survey for England (A-PaNS) found that in 2023/24:

- More than two in three (67%) adults had visited a green and natural space in the previous 14 days, but 22% of adults had not visited a green and natural space in the previous 14 days
- 75% of adults with access to a garden said they spent time in it at least once per week
- 8% of adults reported that they did not have access to a garden or allotment
- Younger adults living in an urban, deprived location from an ethnic minority background are more likely to report that they do not have local green spaces within easy walking distance
- Getting fresh air (57%) and physical health and exercise (49%) were the main reasons for people taking a visit to a green and natural space, followed by "for mental health and wellbeing" (40%), to walk a dog (27%) and to connect with nature (26%)
- 92% of adults who had visited a green and natural space in the previous 14 days agreed that spending time outdoors was good for their physical health

- 89% of people who had visited a green and natural space in the last 14 days agreed that spending time outdoors was good for their mental health. 84% of adults agreed that being in nature makes them very happy
- People who hadn't visited green and natural spaces in the previous 14 days gave "bad/poor weather" (43%), then "poor physical health" (25%) as the reason.
- A third (33%) of people who hadn't visited green and natural spaces in the previous two weeks said they had no concerns or worries about visiting. The most common concern about visiting was "lack of facilities" (25%).

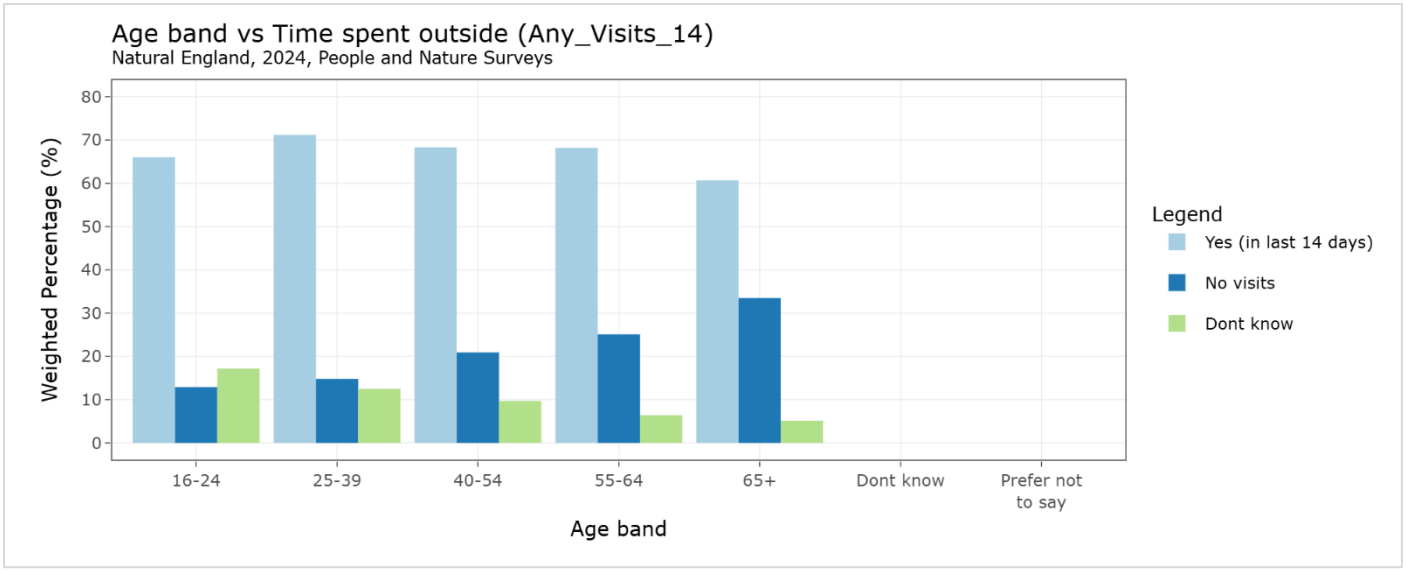
Adults were most likely to visit:

1. urban green spaces (51%)
2. fields/farm (32%)
3. woodland or forest (31%) **or** river, lake or canal (31%)

Older people

People aged 65 and over were the least likely to have spent any time outside in the last 14 days (figure 1) when compared to the other age groups. They were significantly more likely than all other age groups to **not have spent time outside in the past 14 days** (33.5%).

Figure 1: Time spent outside by age band (visits in the last 14 days), England, 2024

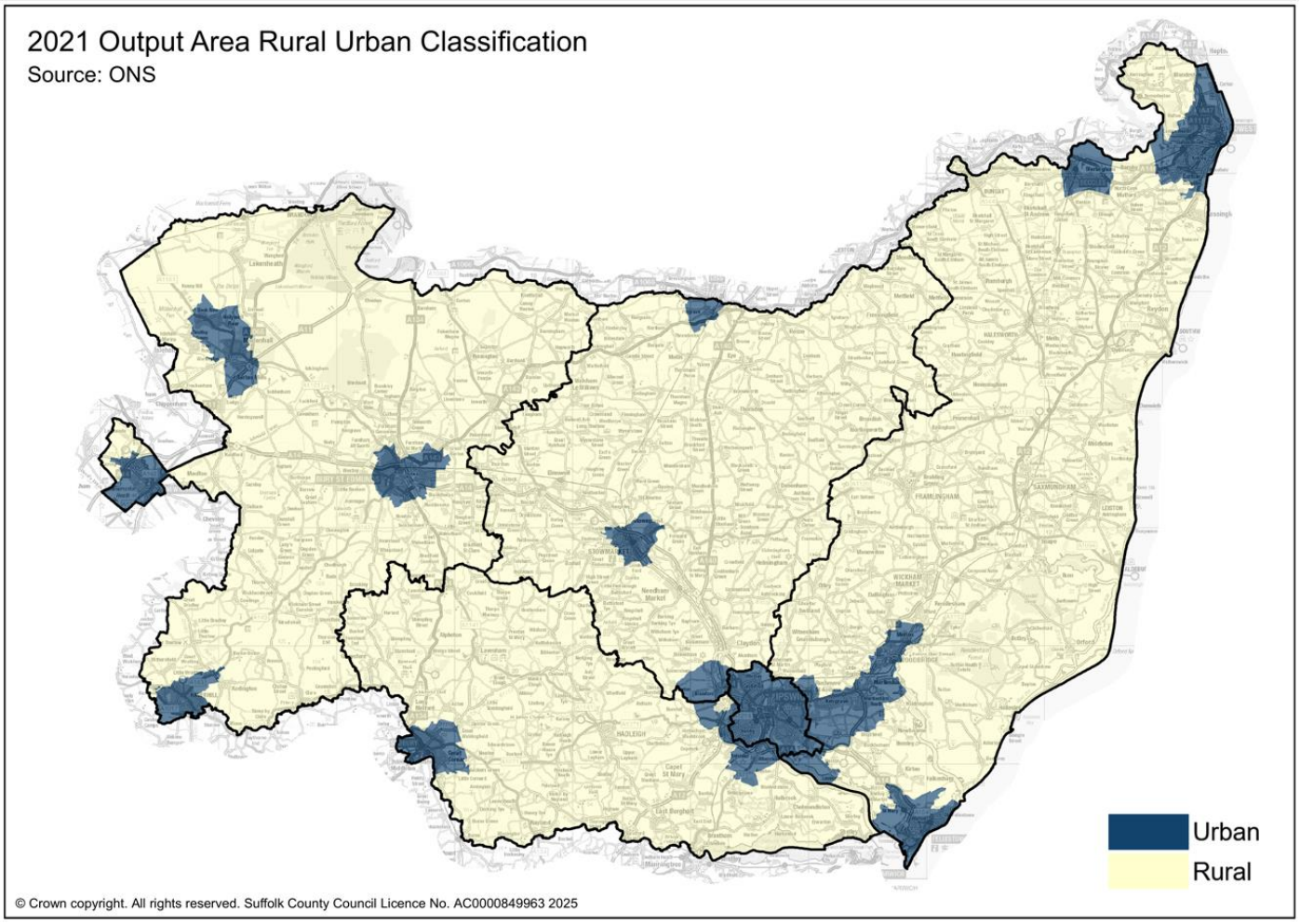


Source: [PaNS data viewer tool]

Suffolk level data

Most of Suffolk's landmass is classified as rural (figure 2). Although rural areas are more likely to be green because they contain a high proportion of vegetation (figures 3 and 4), much of the space cannot be used by the public as it is farmed or privately owned (although Public Rights of Way may be in existence).

Figure 2: Suffolk's rural and urban areas, 2021 (ONS classifications)

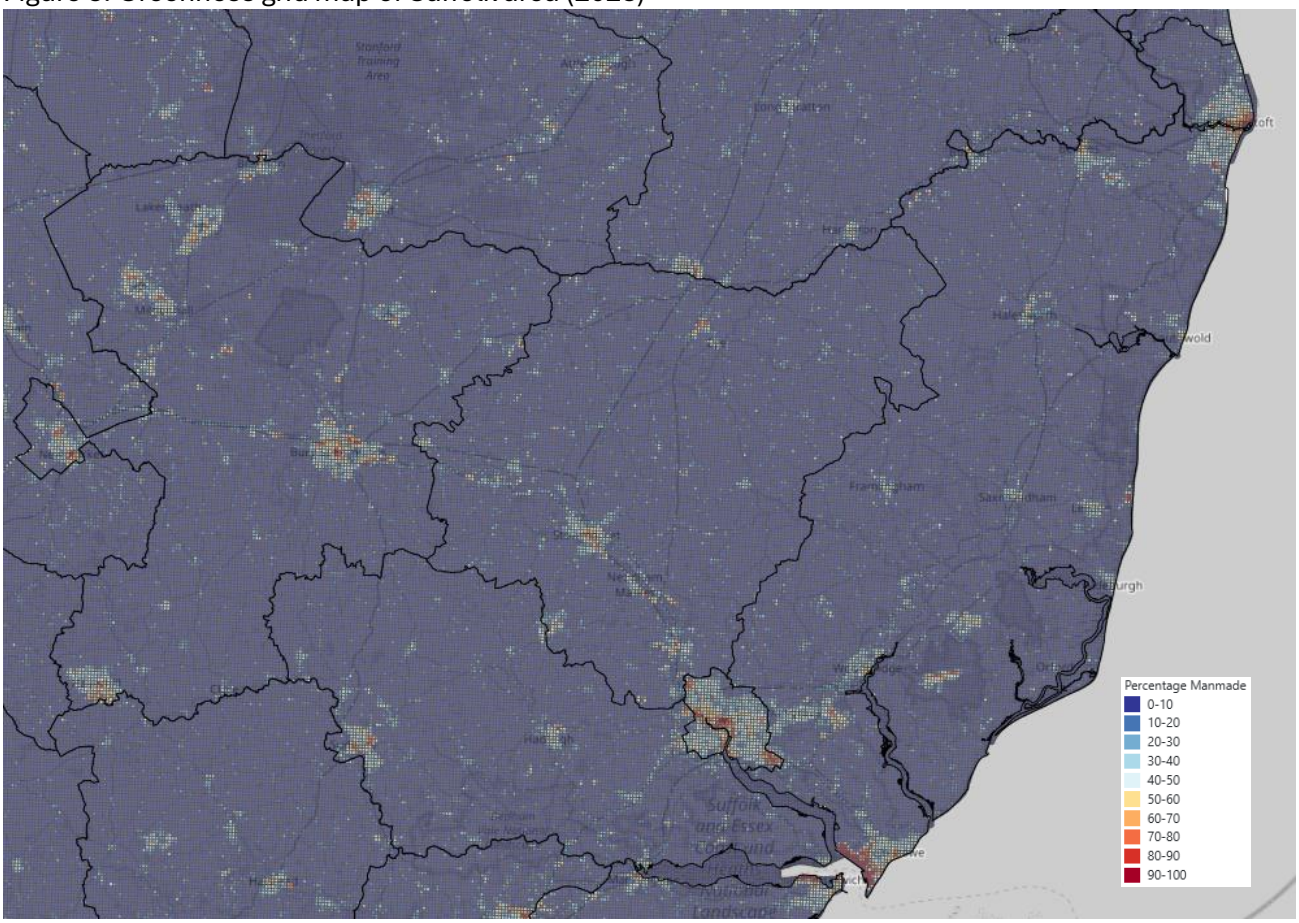


Source: Knowledge, Intelligence & Evidence team (Public Health & Communities Suffolk) mapping of Office for National Statistics (ONS) data released in 2025

Suffolk has a high percentage of "greenness", as shown by the Greenness Grid map below (figure 3). This mapping assesses the percentage of "manmade surface" (not vegetation, water or soils) within 250m grid squares for the whole of England, colour coding them into ten 10% deciles – dark is "good" (lower percentage of manmade surfaces). "Manmade surface" was derived from Ordnance Survey data. This does not take account of tree canopy or small green features such as street planters, and excludes gardens, so is likely to underestimate greenness in urban areas.

Most areas in Suffolk contain 90% (or more) natural surfaces (vegetation, water, soil), shown as dark blue on figure 3. Areas with higher percentages of manmade surfaces correspond to built-up areas.

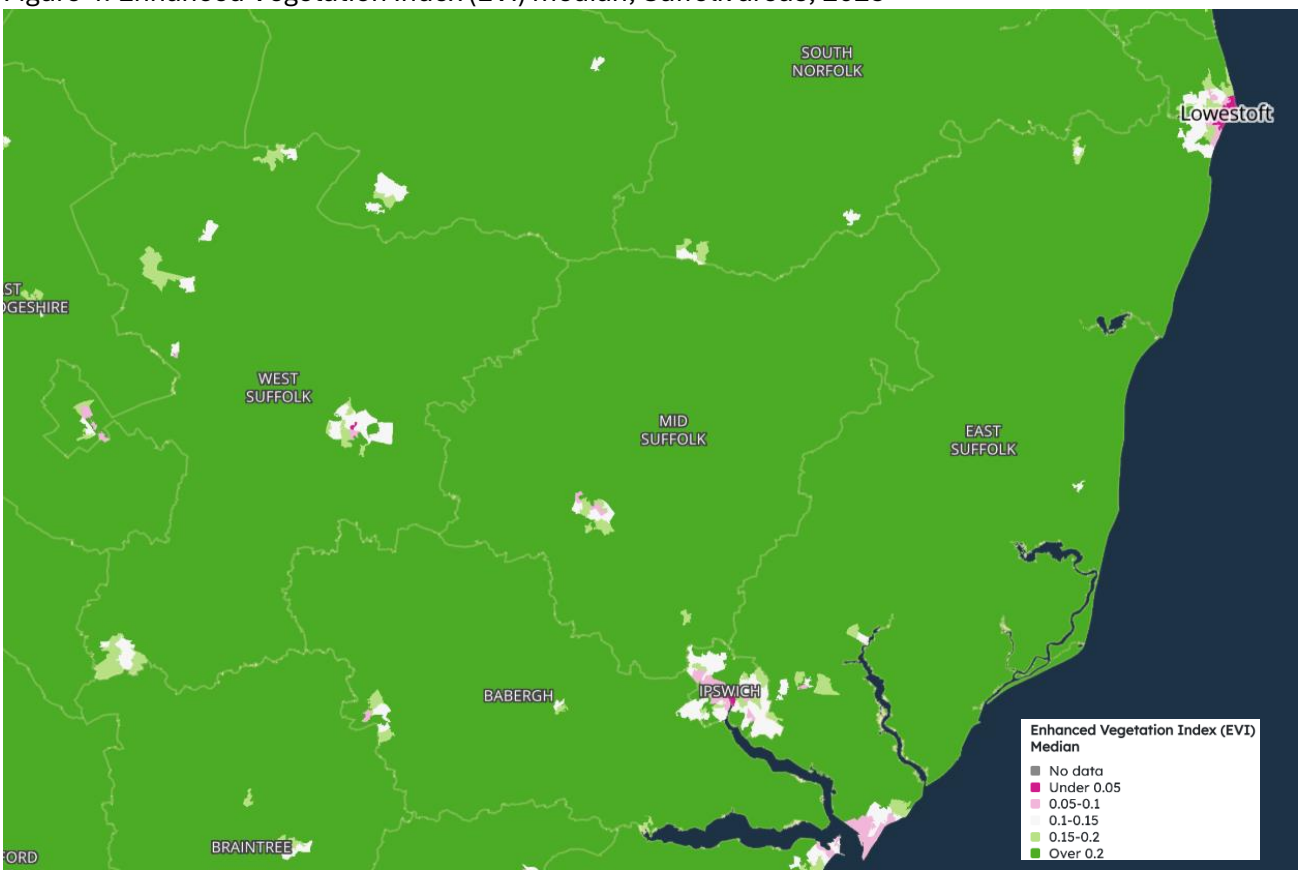
Figure 3: Greenness grid map of Suffolk area (2023)



Source: [Natural England, Green infrastructure geo-visualisation]

The amount of greenness across Suffolk may be more clearly seen in the Enhanced Vegetation Index (EVI) (figure 4) created by analysing of cloud-free satellite images and held by the Geographic Data Service. This vegetation mapping includes private gardens and farmland, and does not differentiate between spaces that are accessible or inaccessible. The EVI shows vegetation at Lower layer Super Output Area (LSOA) level. LSOAs are statistical geographies created by the Office for National Statistics and usually contain 400-1,200 households ([Statistical geographies, ONS]).

Figure 4: Enhanced Vegetation Index (EVI) median, Suffolk areas, 2025

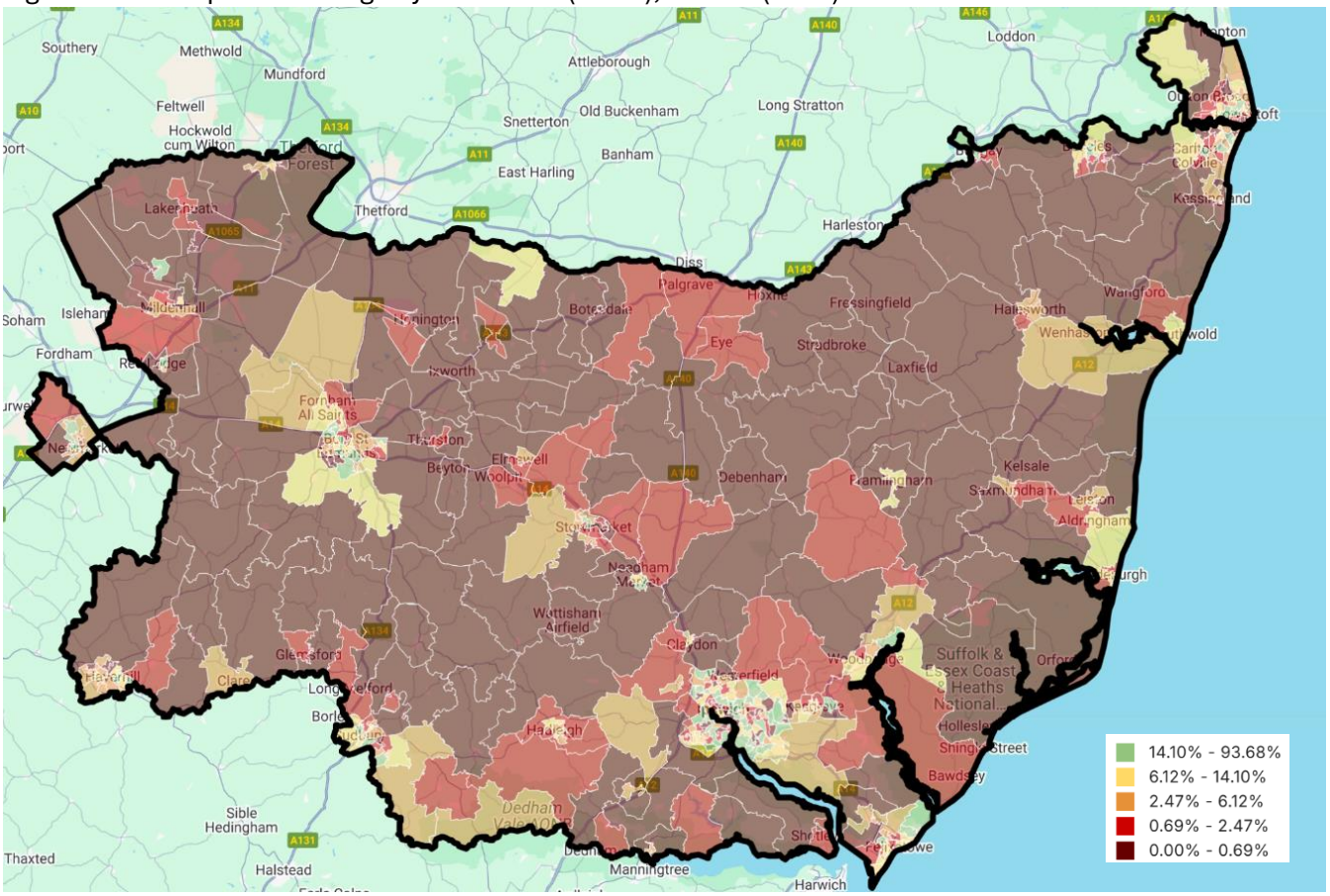


Note: areas shaded green have more vegetation than the median for the UK.
Source: Geographic Data Service, small area UK vegetation indices

The two maps (figures 3 and 4) use different methodologies and source data to measure greenness, but they both broadly show greenness is higher in the more rural and less urban areas of Suffolk. Other methodologies can show a very different picture (**Error! Reference source not found.** 5).

Ordnance Survey's Open Greenspace data shows the percentage of an area that is covered by green space. The types of greenspace included are: allotments or community growing spaces, bowling greens, cemeteries, religious grounds, golf courses, other sports facilities, play spaces, playing fields, public parks or gardens and tennis courts. As a result of this classification, **urban** areas show as having higher levels of greenspace than rural Suffolk (figure 5).

Figure 5: Greenspace coverage by small area (LSOA), Suffolk (2025)



Scale: green areas within Suffolk have the highest percentage of greenspace within the LSOA, with dark red areas having the least access. Data is only shown for areas within Suffolk.
Source: Suffolk Local Insight, Ordnance Survey

Accessible green and blue space

A revised national Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP) is due from the current government in 2025 (Interim statement on the EIP rapid review), but the original 2023 EIP included a commitment that "everyone should live within 15 minutes walk of a green or blue space".

> *Accessible Greenspaces are available for the general public to use free of charge and without time restrictions (although some sites may be closed to the public overnight and there may be fees for parking a vehicle). Accessible greenspaces are available to all, meaning that every reasonable effort is made to comply with the requirements of the Equality Act 2020.*
> *Green infrastructure standards for England (Natural england, 2023)*

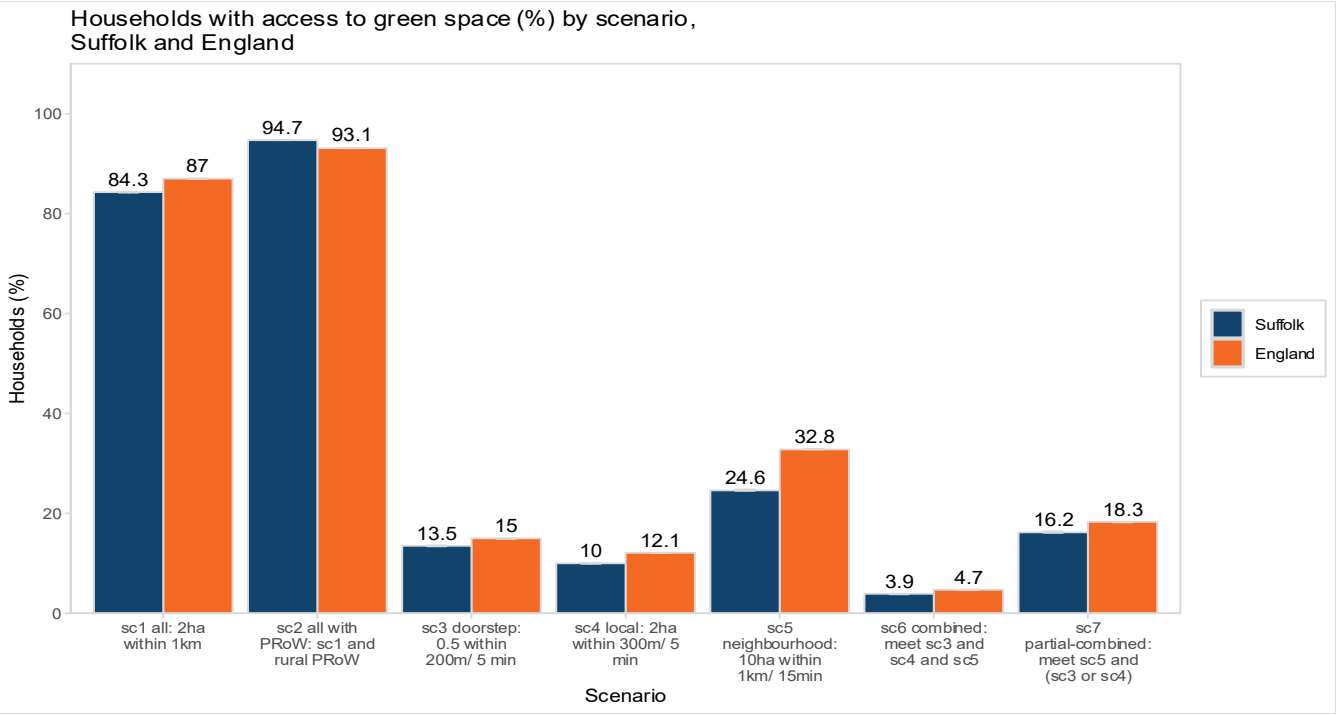
Defra are developing official statistics on access to green space in England, with seven different scenarios for households, depending on definitions. These are currently classified as official statistic in development.

The seven green space scenarios – although these spaces may include water, these scenarios do not currently include blue space (May 2025):

1. **All green space** – considered all accessible green spaces 2 hectares (ha) or larger, and a distance threshold of 1 km (two hectares is about the size of three football pitches)
2. **All green space with public rights of way** (PRoW)– considered all accessible green spaces 2 ha or larger as well as rural rights of way as a type of green space experience, and a distance threshold of 1 km
3. **Doorstep standard** – considered all accessible green spaces of at least 0.5 ha within 200 metres (under 5 mins walk from home). This scenario corresponds to Natural England's Doorstep Accessible Greenspace standard. (half a hectare is about the size of a small rugby pitch)
4. **Local standard** – considered all accessible green spaces of at least 2 ha within 300 metres (5 mins walk from home). This scenario corresponds to Natural England's Local Accessible Natural Greenspace
5. **Neighbourhood standard** – considered all accessible green spaces of at least 10 ha within 1 km (15 minutes' walk from home). This scenario corresponds to Natural England's Neighbourhood Accessible Natural Greenspace
6. **Combined** – Scenarios 3 to 5 combined, where a household is considered to have access to green space if they meet the criteria of the Doorstep scenario (Scenario 3) and the Local standard (Scenario 4) and the Neighbourhood standard (Scenario 5) concurrently
7. **Partial-combined** – a mixture of Scenarios 3 to 5. In this scenario, households are considered to have accessible green space where the Neighbourhood standard (Scenario 5), and one of either the Doorstep standard (Scenario 3) or Local standard (Scenario 4) have been met

DEFRA acknowledge that how green space is defined and measured for example by size, type, and how far people are from it—makes a big difference in how many households are considered to have access. Broader definitions and including rural paths show higher access, especially in rural areas, while stricter standards (like only counting large parks within short walking distances) show much lower access, especially in both rural and urban areas. This is highlighted when analysing Suffolk data below.

Figure 6: Households in Suffolk and England with access to green space (%) by scenario



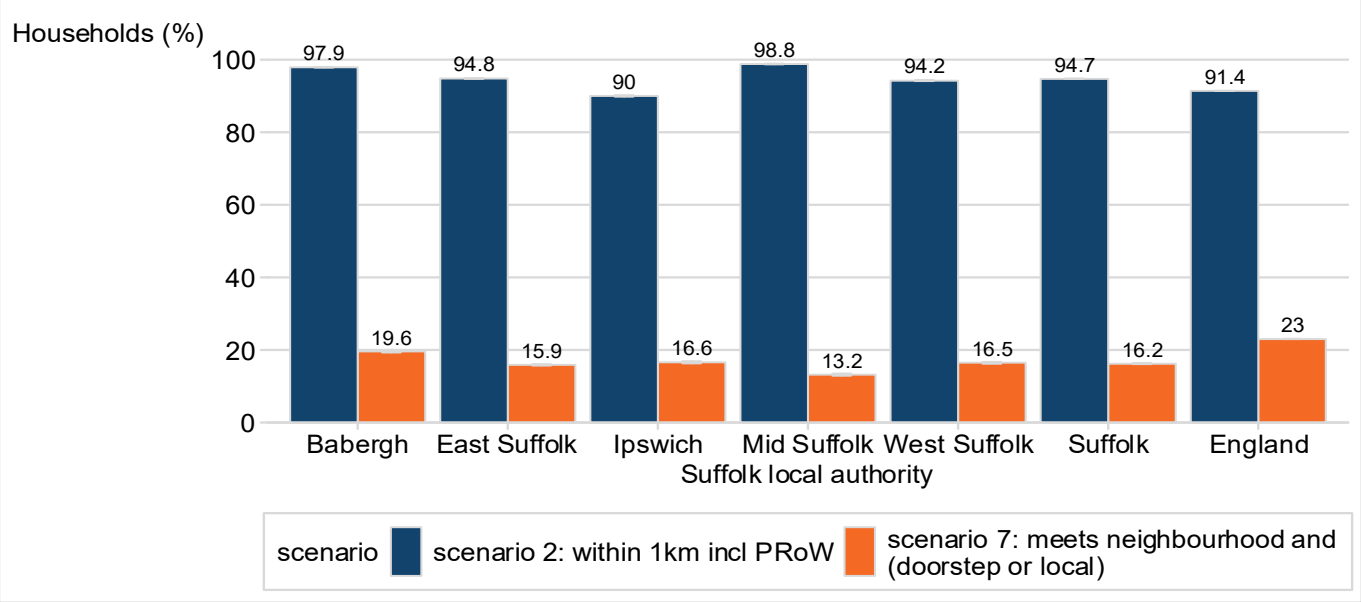
Note: blue is Suffolk, orange is England

Source: [Defra,Access to green space in England, 2025]

94.7% Suffolk households have access to greenspace using scenario 2, which considers rural rights of way as accessible green space - the only scenario where access is statistically significantly higher than England (93.1%). Suffolk has statistically significantly lower access than England for all other scenarios, which measure the amount of accessible land and its proximity. This is most noticeable for scenario 5, Neighbourhood Accessible Natural Greenspace (accessible green spaces of at least 10 ha within 1 km or 15 minutes' walk from home). Less than one in four (24.6%) households in Suffolk meet this scenario, compared to almost a third (32.8%) in England as a whole.

Figure 7 compares scenario 2 and scenario 7 and highlights the difference in 'access' between narrow and broader criteria. Scenarios 2 and 7 were chosen because Scenario 2 captures broad access to all significant green spaces including public rights of way, while Scenario 7 reflects more practical access by combining large neighbourhood spaces with either local or doorstep green spaces.

Figure 7: Suffolk households with access to greenspace by local authority, comparing scenario 2 (including PRoW) and 7 (Neighbourhood as well as Doorstep or Local green space)



Note: blue is Suffolk, orange is England
Source: Defra, Access to green space in England, 2025

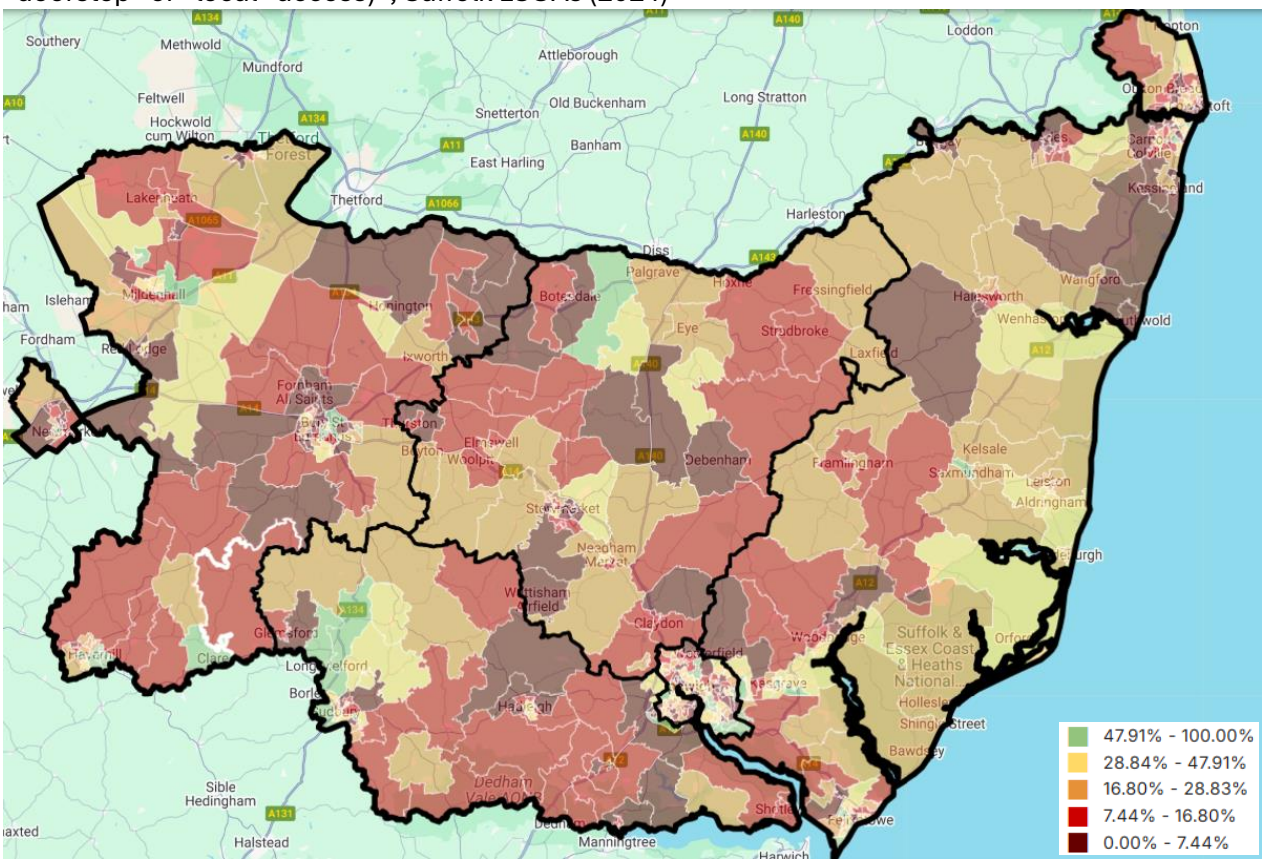
When scenario 7 data is mapped to LSOA (figure 8) areas including parts of Haverhill East and South have the highest percentage of households with access to green space using this criteria. Around 50 LSOAs in Suffolk contain no households with access to greenspace according to this criteria, including parts of Bury St Edmunds, Ipswich, Lowestoft and Stowmarket (see interactive map for detail).

Defra's seven scenarios offer varying definitions of greenspace access, from broad national coverage to strict local standards. Scenario 7 strikes a balanced middle ground, requiring access to a large greenspace (≥10 ha within 1 km) and either a small (≥0.5 ha within 200m) or medium-sized space (≥2 ha within 300m). This is a useful scenario for Suffolk, where:

- Rural geography means many residents live near large natural areas but may lack smaller, walkable greenspaces.
- Dispersed settlements make tight proximity standards (like Scenario 3) unrealistic for many communities.

Scenario 7 reflects both strategic and practical access, capturing meaningful greenspace provision without setting unattainably high thresholds. It could be useful in supporting equity and planning analysis, helping identify areas where investment in smaller greenspaces could improve overall access.

Figure 8: Percentage of households with access to green space (scenario 7: neighbourhood and either "doorstep" or "local" access)*, Suffolk LSOAs (2024)



Scale: green areas within Suffolk have the highest percentage of households with access to greenspace within the LSOA; dark red areas have the least access. Data is only shown for areas within Suffolk.
Source: Suffolk local insight, Defra

A 2024 report by the Health Foundation notes that there are inequalities in green space access. Namely:

People who live in more deprived areas are more likely to live in neighbourhoods with less access to green space.	•28% of people living in the most deprived neighbourhoods live in the 10% of neighbourhoods with the least access to green space. This compares with only 7% of people in the least deprived neighbourhoods.
People from minority ethnic groups are less likely to live in neighbourhoods with more access to green spaces compared with white people.	•40% of black, black British, Caribbean or African people live in the neighbourhoods with the least access to green space. This compares to 37% of people from 'other' ethnic groups, 34% of people from an Asian or Asian British background, and 27% of people from multiple ethnic groups. Only 13% of people from a white background live in neighbourhoods that are deprived of green space.
There is less inequality in access to green space based on age, although younger people are less likely to live in neighbourhoods with the most access to green space.	•Inequalities based on age are less stark. People aged over 64 have the greatest access to green space with 31% living in neighbourhoods with the most access to green space, compared with 18% of 25 to 34-year-olds.
Disabled people are slightly less likely to live in areas that are most deprived of green space.	•There are small differences in access to green space by disability status. Disabled people are slightly less likely to live in areas that are most deprived of green space.

The Health Foundation also assert: Access to green space is lower in more deprived areas, and different population groups have a different likelihood of living in more deprived areas. Therefore, inequalities in likelihood of living in areas with lower access to green space will reflect inequalities in their likelihood of living in more deprived areas.

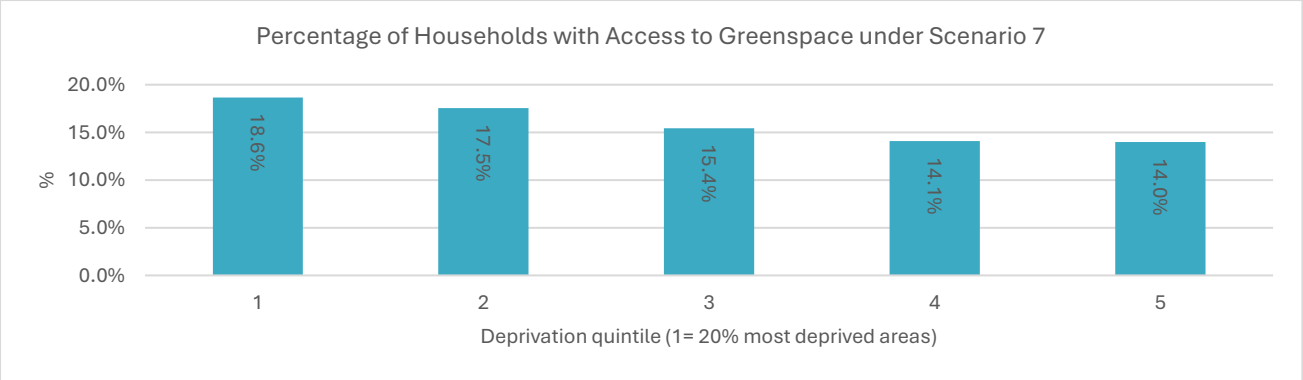
The following analysis explores the relationship between greenspace access and deprivation in Suffolk by examining Defra's Scenario 7 at LSOA level alongside Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) quintile data. The aim being to understand whether more deprived communities in Suffolk experience better or worse access to greenspace under this scenario, and what this reveals about spatial equity in the county's greenspace provision.

Figure 8 shows that as deprivation decreases, so does access to greenspace as defined by scenario 7. Chi squared analysis of the difference between quintiles 1 and 5 indicates a highly significant difference in access between the most and least deprived areas—with more deprived areas having better access in this scenario.

In Suffolk, it's possible that more deprived areas show higher greenspace access under Scenario 7 due to their proximity to large public parks, coastal areas, or nature reserves. Scenario 7 requires access to a large greenspace (≥10 ha within 1 km) and either a small or medium-sized space nearby. Urban areas like parts of Ipswich or Lowestoft, which include some of Suffolk's most deprived communities, may meet these criteria more easily due to historical planning decisions that placed parks and recreation grounds within walking distance of homes.

In contrast, more affluent areas in Suffolk are often rural, with homes surrounded by private land or agricultural fields that don't count as accessible greenspace. These households may enjoy scenic environments but lack formal public greenspaces within the required distances. As a result, they may not meet Scenario 7's criteria, despite living in greener surroundings. This highlights how greenspace access metrics can reveal hidden variation in provision, even in areas that appear well-served by nature.

Figure 8: Percentage of households with access to greenspace under Scenario 7 by deprivation quntile for Suffolk, 2024



Source: Indices of Deprivation (2019) and DEFRA data (2025)

Important to note is that while national-level analyses, such as those by The Health Foundation, suggest that access to green space is generally lower in more deprived areas, local findings—such as Suffolk's Scenario 7 analysis using Defra data earlier in this document—show higher access in more deprived quintiles. This apparent contradiction may reflect local spatial characteristics, but it also underscores the importance of how green space is defined. Different datasets and methodologies may include or exclude certain types of green space—such as informal open land, private gardens, or agricultural fields—which can significantly affect measured access. This highlights the need for context-sensitive approaches to measuring and addressing green space inequalities.

Suffolk's Public Rights of Way (PRoW) Team notes that:

- Suffolk's Rights of Way network is extensive and provides access into large areas of protected landscapes, nature sites, tourism destinations (such as Constable Country) and farmland. The network is 3,500 miles (5,000km) long, and much of it crosses farmland. Public Rights of Way are legally defined and protected routes for people to use at all times.
- In addition to PRoW, it's worth noting in the local context that Suffolk has large areas of Open Access land. Open Access is defined and mapped by Defra as either heathland, moorland, downland or mountains. It provides people with the right to roam. In Suffolk there are 5,000 ha of heathland in 2 main areas: The Brecks north of Bury St Edmunds to the Norfolk border; The Sandlings along the coast between Ipswich and Southwold – for example Dunwich Heath.
- Suffolk has 5,000 ha of forest managed by Forestry England and, similar to Open Access, gives people the freedom to roam. The main forests are Thetford Forest and Kings Forest (The Brecks), and Rendlesham Forest, Tunstall Forest and Dunwich Forest (The Sandlings).

Green Space Index – Fields in Trust

Since the 1930s, Fields in Trust have set out guidance to planners on how much open space there should be based on population size, to ensure there is as equitable access as possible and that every community can experience the benefits. Their minimum recommendation is approximately 2.4ha of accessible green space for every 1,000 people (24 m^2 per person). Their analysis is based on Ordnance Survey data, focusing on parks and green spaces available to the public for recreational use and excluding land such as cemeteries, golf courses and common land.

According to Fields in Trust, all Lower Tier Local Authorities (LTLAs) in Suffolk have more than their minimum standard of **all** green space provision per person, ranging from 26.8 m^2 in Ipswich to 54.7m^2 per person in West Suffolk (Table 1). Only Ipswich has less than the Great Britain average (30m^2 per person).

Fields in Trust also produce a Green Space Index (GSI) (Table 1 second column). Only West Suffolk meets this standard. The GSI is "a composite score calculated from an analysis of parks/play provision and sports provision, whereas provision per person is an average of all green space. Even if an area's provision per person meets open space standards, areas with fewer designated sports facilities (playing fields or otherwise) may still be deficient." In other words, while most areas meet the minimum green space standard, only West Suffolk provides green space that is also well-equipped with sports and play facilities, potentially highlighting an opportunity to improve designed recreational provision elsewhere.

Table 1: Green space provision, Fields in Trust, Suffolk lower tier local authorities, 2024

Suffolk LTLA	Green space provision per person (m^2)	Green Space Index	Estimated GSI change between 2024 and 2043
Babergh	34.03	Less than the standard	-5.08%
East Suffolk	31.60	Less than the standard	- 8.04%
Ipswich	26.76	Less than the standard	- 0.49%
Mid Suffolk	30.52	Less than the standard	- 4.21%
West Suffolk	54.74	Greater than the standard	- 4.75%

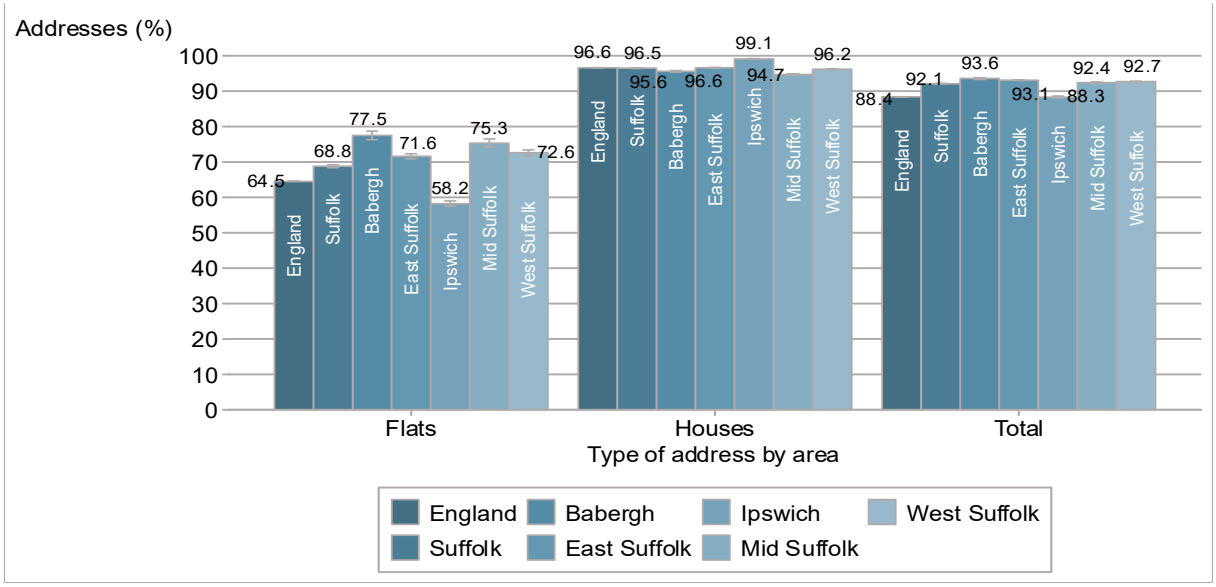
Source: Fields in Trust Green Space Index (2024)

Private outdoor space

92.1% of addresses in Suffolk have private access to outdoor space (figure 10), statistically significantly higher than England (88.4%). Data is available at Middle Super Output Area (MSOA) level (figure 11). 64.3% of addresses in Ipswich Central (MSOA Ipswich 007) have private outdoor space, the lowest level in Suffolk. This area has a high number of flats, and flats are significantly less likely to have access to private outdoor space (68.8% in Suffolk, 64.5% in England). In all other Suffolk MSOAs, at least 81.8% of addresses have private

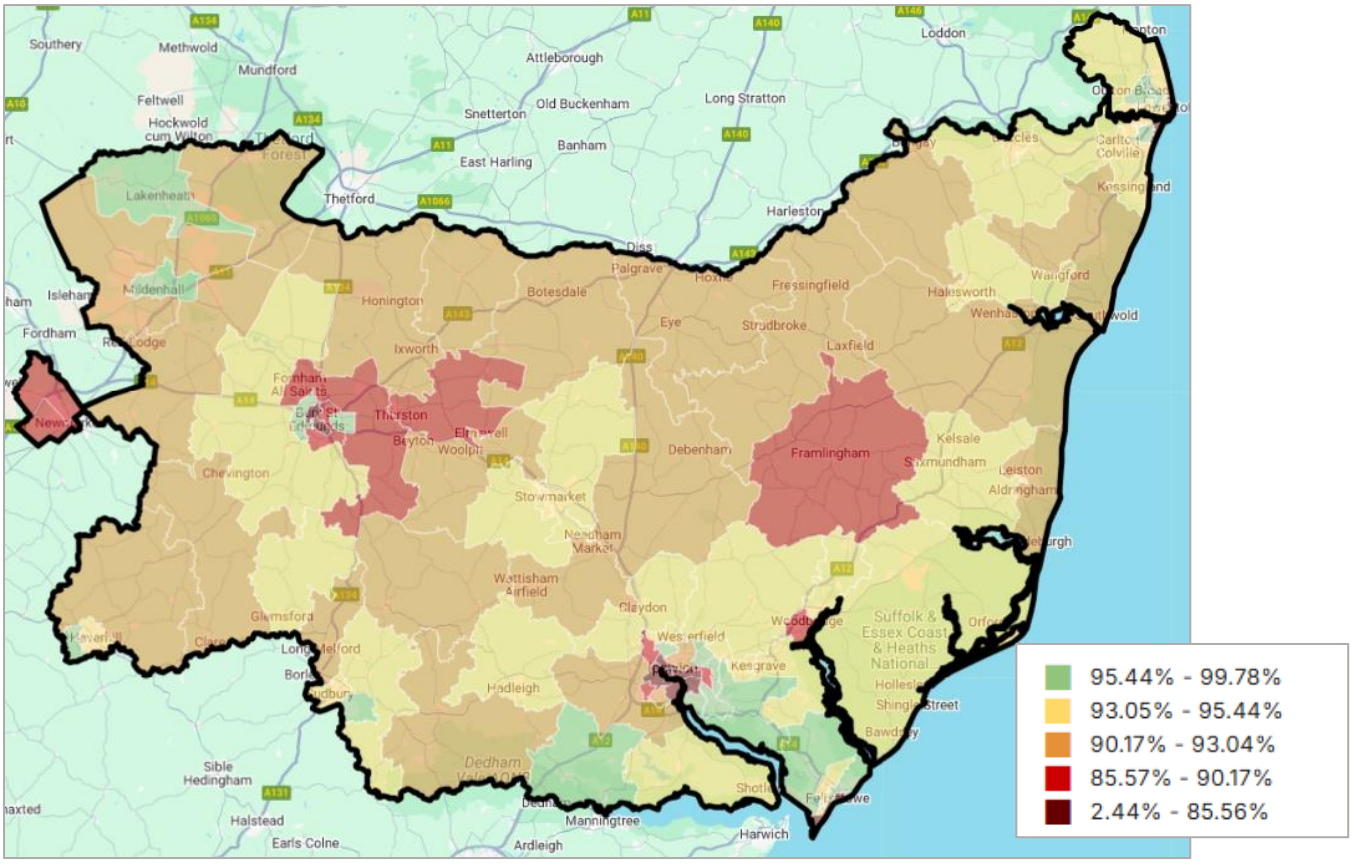
outdoor space. Ipswich also has the area in Suffolk with the highest percentage of addresses with private outdoor space – 99.5% addresses in Castle Hill (MSOA Ipswich 002) have access to private outdoor space.

Figure 10: Suffolk addresses with private outdoor space by lower tier local authority and compared to England, 2020



Source: [Office for National Statistics, Access to garden space, 2020]

Figure 11: Percentage of households with access to private outdoor space, by MSOA in Suffolk, 2020



Source: [Local Insight] with data from the Office for National Statistics

Suffolk Coastal Communities research summary

In summer 2025, innovative research about Suffolk's coastal communities was published. The quantitative and qualitative insights note that Suffolk's coastal communities are deeply shaped by their proximity to the natural environment, with green and blue spaces playing a central role in residents' sense of place, wellbeing, and identity. The following information summarises insights across four communities where qualitative insights were gathered—Aldeburgh, Hollesley, Kessingland, and Reydon.

- **Natural beauty and outdoor connection**: Residents frequently described their areas using terms related to nature and the outdoors. The natural environment was consistently cited as a source of pride and wellbeing.
- **Positive impact on wellbeing**: The countryside and coastal landscapes were appreciated more deeply during the COVID-19 pandemic, with some residents reporting increased time spent outdoors and a renewed connection to nature.
- **Barriers to access and use**: Despite the presence of natural assets, some residents highlighted challenges such as poor footpaths, limited public transport, and traffic issues that can restrict access to green and blue spaces—particularly for those without private transport or with mobility issues.
- **Social isolation and limited amenities**: A lack of inclusive activities and amenities—especially for young people—was noted as a barrier to fully benefiting from these coastal communities. This was compounded by concerns about remoteness and affordability.
- **Community tensions and change**: Some residents expressed anxiety about changes to their communities, including second-home ownership and new developments, which may affect access to and the character of local natural spaces.

Overall, while Suffolk's coastal communities value their green and blue spaces highly, the report highlights the need to address physical, social, and infrastructural barriers to ensure equitable access and sustained engagement with these vital environments.

Contextual information and insights about green and blue space

A full literature review was not undertaken for this profile; however, some key contextual information has been summarised below.

Access to green / blue space

Access to nature and proximity to green space both appear to influence wellbeing, even when direct interaction is limited. Evidence suggests that simply seeing nature can positively affect mood, stress levels, and even recovery times in clinical and institutional settings.

Beyond physical access, living near green space may offer ambient benefits such as reduced pollution and improved emotional health, with some studies linking proximity to lower risks of conditions like asthma and common mental health disorders. However, emerging research also highlights that actual contact with nature may be more impactful than proximity alone, pointing to the importance of both availability and engagement.

Access

- The Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) suggests indoor plants "support human health through wellbeing and productivity improvement". Evidence is limited and often small scale, but some experiments do report things such as stress reduction and attention sharpening.
- A small study of psychiatric inpatient records (244 participants) in Germany found that the brightness and "greenness" of a window views significantly reduced length of stay.
- Studies of office workers have shown that people like to have window views, and that being able to see nature is associated with increased job satisfaction, improved mood and wellbeing, and reduced anxiety and stress.
- A study of inmates in solitary confinement at one prison in the United States of America found that those watched nature videos "reported feeling significantly calmer, less irritable, and more

empathetic, and committed 26% fewer violent infractions as compared to those who did not watch the videos".

Proximity may be enough

- "Ambient greenness", or living nearby to green space may benefit people, even if they do not (or cannot) access the space – for example, there may be reduced noise and air pollution, tree canopies may reduce heat, or green views may have a positive impact on wellbeing. This may help to explain perceived benefits of rural living, even though most of the land is privately owned and not considered "accessible".
- A recent (February 2025) systematic review found three studies on visibility of green space, all of which reported significant positive effects on emotional health. A population health study of Wales showed that more ambient greenness (excluding blue space) was "associated with a reduced likelihood of subsequently having a CMD" (Common Mental health Disorder).
- Residential proximity (exposure to greenness) was associated with a lower risks asthma among children 7–12 years of age in a Canadian study of nearly a million infants.
- However research based on data from 18 countries noted that "simply residing in close proximity to natural environments is less important than contact with or visits to natural environments…" when considering the pathways to wellbeing.

Connection may be more important than time

- There is a distinct difference between contact and connection to the natural environment. Natural England notes that "contact with nature describes the process of spending time in nature, whereas connection to nature is a psychological concept looking at an individual's feeling and attachment to the nature around them, and its subsequent health and wellbeing impact". Emerging evidence suggests that simply noticing nature may be more influential for wellbeing than the duration of exposure.

Climate change, green and blue space and health

The Department for Energy Security and Net Zero notes that climate change, driven by human activity, is causing rising global and UK temperatures, melting ice, rising sea levels, and more frequent extreme weather events. The UK has warmed by 1.24°C since the 1961–1990 average, with 2022 being the hottest year on record and the first to exceed 40°C.

Ocean temperatures are rising, and their chemistry is changing due to carbon dioxide absorption, leading to increased acidity. Sea levels have risen by around 20 cm over the past century, with the rate of rise accelerating due to glacier melt and ocean warming. Extreme weather—such as heatwaves, heavy rainfall, flooding and droughts—is becoming more intense and frequent.

While adaptation is essential, its effectiveness declines with further warming, making urgent action to reduce emissions, build resilience and protect the public's health critical.

Green and blue spaces play a vital role in helping communities adapt to and mitigate the effects of climate change:

- In urban environments, blue-green infrastructure provides a sustainable and adaptive solution for managing water and flood risks. Unlike traditional grey infrastructure, these systems offer multiple added benefits—enhancing biodiversity, improving water quality, supporting mental and physical wellbeing through access to nature, and contributing to local economic vitality. They also help cities cope with climate-related challenges such as heatwaves, air pollution, and drought, making urban environments healthier and more resilient.
- Green infrastructure can help with climate mitigation and adaptation. This network of green and blue spaces improves the quality of the environment, the condition and connectivity of natural areas, as

well as improving citizens' health and quality of life. Developing green infrastructure can also support a green economy and create job opportunities.

Greenspace Scotland note that green space can also deliver the following benefits:

- improve air quality and reduce noise pollution
- reduce the urban heat island effect (where built up areas are much warmer than nearby countryside) through evaporating water from trees and plants, reducing energy use from air-conditioning, shading of trees and decreasing wind speed
- support adaptation to and mitigation of the effects of climate change
- provide opportunities to develop commuting and recreational routes to support active travel
- create green corridors, supporting biodiversity and connecting habitats
- bring people and nature together
- provide opportunities for local food growing and generation of heat and energy

Public Health and Communities Suffolk are currently writing a needs assessment on the health impacts of the changing environment (due at the end of 2025).

Physical and mental health

In 2020, Public Health England estimated that good access to greenspace could save around £2.1 billion per year in health costs through increased physical activity. The review also noted that living in greener environments supported better health outcomes, aided recovery, and helped manage poor health. Greater exposure to natural spaces is linked to improved mental health and wellbeing, including lower depression, anxiety, and fatigue, and higher quality of life for children and adults.

Natural England notes that populations with more access to nature tend to have lower rates of all-cause mortality, type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular and respiratory diseases, and better perinatal outcomes, though evidence on cancer, musculoskeletal conditions, allergies, and differences by type of natural environment is limited. Nature-based initiatives may benefit people with long-term conditions, but more research is needed across socio-demographic groups. Evidence suggests a generally weak but positive link between nature exposure and lower overweight and obesity rates, with effects potentially influenced by socio-economic status.

Research shows that accessible, high-quality natural environments are associated with increased physical activity, and that exercising in natural settings may provide greater health benefits and enjoyment than other environments. Proximity matters: households closer to green space are more likely to achieve recommended activity levels. UK survey data looking at socio-economic status and distance living from nature found that people living more than 300m away from accessible greenspace had less likelihood of achieving the required recommended physical activity levels than those who lived closer to green space.

Urban green spaces also foster social cohesion, encouraging positive social interactions, community bonds, and behaviours that improve wellbeing. For children, nature exposure supports physical activity, lower obesity, better mental health, cognitive performance, and attention, though engagement has declined due to safety concerns, limited access, and competition from indoor activities.

Blue spaces—coasts and freshwater—are linked to better self-reported general and mental health. Benefits may be partly due to land-based outdoor activity, but some effects, particularly for freshwater, occur independently of physical activity. Frequency and type of blue space matter: rivers, canals, and the sea are associated with greater mental wellbeing, while frequent green space use is linked to better general health.

Inequalities

The 2022 Natural Environment report on the links between natural environments and physical health notes the following in relation to natural environments and physical health inequalities:

There is growing evidence that access to natural environments—particularly green spaces—can help reduce physical health inequalities, especially among socio-economically disadvantaged groups.

- **General health outcomes:** Studies show that people living in greener areas experience lower income-related health inequalities, including reduced mortality rates from all causes and circulatory diseases. In deprived communities, natural environments may buffer the negative health effects of long-term deprivation.
- **Birth outcomes:** Inequalities in birth outcomes have also been shown to be lowest in populations who have the greatest exposure to greenspaces, particularly among parents with lower educational attainment and socio-economic status.
- **Socio-Economic benefits:** A global review of 90 studies found that individuals with lower socio-economic status (SES) tend to benefit more from green spaces than those from more affluent backgrounds. This effect was stronger in European contexts than in North America.
- **Physical activity and obesity:** Evidence on the role of natural environments in reducing obesity-related inequalities is limited and inconsistent. However, some data suggest that individuals with poorer health may gain more from physical activity in greener environments.
- **Access and activity levels:** People living in more deprived areas are generally less likely to engage in physical activity. Proximity to green space (within 300m) is associated with higher likelihood of meeting recommended activity levels.

Connection to Nature (2022) and social demographics

Natural England note evidence suggests that connection to nature (CTN) varies across social demographic groups, though research is limited and often inconsistent due to differing methodologies. Opportunities for CTN are not equally distributed. Barriers include poor-quality[1] local provision and broader societal inequalities, which were especially evident during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Mental health

The 2022 Natural England review on the links between natural environments and mental health asserts that access to green and blue spaces is increasingly recognised as a key contributor to positive mental health and wellbeing. The following information is taken from that review:

- Human wellbeing is closely intertwined with the natural environment, yet rising urbanisation is altering this relationship - limiting exposure and weakening emotional connection to nature.
- Most population-level studies show that living near natural environments has a protective effect on mental health. Greater exposure to green space around the home is linked to improved self-reported mental wellbeing and a reduced risk of stress, psychological distress, depressive symptoms, clinical anxiety, and mood disorders in adults.
- A growing body of robust evidence shows that both population-level exposure and individual use of natural environments are linked to improved mood and wellbeing.
- These benefits vary by socio-economic status and access, with nature-based interventions proving effective and cost-efficient in promoting mental health.
- However, while research is strengthening, some studies may be subject to bias, making it difficult to determine whether nature exposure directly improves mental health or whether healthier individuals are simply more likely to seek out natural environments.

Green spaces can also play a role in reducing isolation and loneliness by providing the opportunity to participate in shared social activities.

[1] It is recognised that quantifying the 'quality' of green space remains challenging; a footpath offering expansive views and rich wildlife may be undervalued, while designated sites deemed 'accessible' can be poorly maintained and uninviting — highlighting the need for more nuanced, experiential measures in assessing local provision.

In relation to mental health, the 2022 Natural England review on links between natural environments and mental health notes:

- Access to natural environments may help reduce socio-economic inequalities in mental health, though the relationship is complex and influenced by multiple factors.
- Economically deprived countries tend to have less access to good-quality public green space, limiting mental health benefits at a population level.
- In Portugal, neighbourhoods with higher deprivation had greater average distances to green space, reducing accessibility and potential mental health support.
- In Bradford, green space was linked to fewer behavioural difficulties among South Asian children, suggesting targeted benefits for ethnic minority groups.
- During the COVID-19 lockdown in Scotland, people in deprived urban areas without access to private or shared outdoor space experienced greater mental health distress.

Overall, while natural environments can support mental wellbeing, unequal access—driven by socio-economic and spatial factors—means that not all groups benefit equally. Addressing these disparities is key to leveraging nature's potential to reduce mental health inequalities.

Barriers, adverse impacts and inequalities

While green and blue spaces offer significant health and wellbeing benefits, it is important to recognise that not all exposure is universally positive. Certain environmental and social factors can limit access or introduce risks—ranging from allergies and pests to unintended consequences like green gentrification (see below).

Some studies have even linked proximity to certain types of green space with increased health risks, such as exposure to pesticides or higher rates of skin cancer. Moreover, barriers such as mobility, income, ethnicity, and age can prevent equitable use of natural environments, particularly for physical activity.

Whilst acknowledging the differences in correlation vs causation, understanding these limitations is essential to designing inclusive, safe, and effective nature-based interventions that truly benefit all communities.

Some examples of adverse impacts highlighted by Beyond greenspace, University of Exeter:

- Pollen may cause allergies, these can be heightened in urban areas compounding urban heat island effects and air pollution
- People may be more likely to be affected by "pest" species such as ticks
- Improvements to, or creation of, accessible green may have social impacts such as housing cost increases ("green gentrification")

A French study found risk of all-site cancer increased with greenspace and proximity to agricultural lands and forests (not urban green space). This may be due to increased exposure to pesticides.

An Australian study found higher rates of skin cancer in areas with more green space - reported in Links between natural environments and physical health (information note 66)

2022 research examined how smells experienced in woodlands contribute to wellbeing across four seasons. They found both positive and negative impacts on self-reported levels of wellbeing. Positive feelings included senses of relaxation / peace / happiness. Negative associations included smells warning participants about the presence of allergen-causing substances, and certain smells being deleterious to wellbeing.
While blue spaces are widely recognised for their wellbeing benefits, they can also present risks and unintended consequences such as vector-borne diseases, with the presence of ticks and mosquitoes, as well as presenting a risk of drowning.

A 2024 Natural England report on Identifying Social and Cultural Barriers to Nature highlighted that research consistently shows that access to greenspace is vital for physical and mental health, especially in urban areas. However, rising health inequalities have highlighted disparities in greenspace access across different groups.

For example:

- **Demographics**: Usage varies by age, gender, ethnicity, disability, education, and employment status.
- **Health and ethnicity**: Adults with long-term illnesses and ethnic minorities are less likely to access nature.
- **Socio-Economic Status**: Higher-income groups access greenspace more frequently than lower-income groups.
- **Geographical barriers**: Proximity to greenspace is linked to housing costs, disadvantaging lower-income and ethnic minority groups.
- **Cultural & social experiences**:
    - Childhood experiences influence future access.
    - Negative experiences (e.g., fear, harassment) reduce confidence in visiting nature.
    - Ethnic minorities, women, LGBTQ+ individuals, and disabled people report higher rates of harassment.
    - Racism in greenspaces can deter access across generations.

Representation & perception:

- Lack of inclusive representation in nature-related advertising contributes to feelings of exclusion.
- Minority groups often perceive greenspaces as predominantly "White," reducing their engagement.

As part of the Identifying Social and Cultural Barriers to Nature review, primary research was conducted in Birmingham, whilst demographically different from Suffolk, it is likely that many of these findings would resonate at a Suffolk level. Some key findings from the research:

- Barriers included feelings of unsafety, poor maintenance, and lack of infrastructure, highlighting the importance of addressing issues beyond proximity and quantity.
- Having a clear purpose for visiting green space—such as walking a pet or taking children to play—was a strong motivator. Spaces with play equipment were particularly valued.
- Participants held diverse understandings of nature and how it should function. Spaces perceived as dominated by specific groups (e.g. dog walkers) discouraged others from visiting.
- A lack of perceived purpose led some individuals to feel excluded from green spaces, especially men who feared standing out or appearing out of place.
- Dogs and cycling were both motivators and deterrents for accessing green space. While some participants used green space specifically for these activities, others felt unsafe or uncomfortable due to their presence.
- Participants expressed a need for different types of spaces within parks to cater to varying needs, such as quiet areas for those with social anxiety.
- There was a strong interest in regular, inclusive activities within green spaces, including exercise groups, art workshops, and informal community gatherings. In addition, events and activities that reflect the diversity of local communities were seen as effective in making green spaces more inclusive.
- Past experiences with nature influenced current engagement. Those with positive childhood experiences accessed green space more frequently, while those without such experiences expressed fear or uncertainty.
- Feelings of safety and inclusion within the wider community were closely linked to comfort in accessing green space. When individuals felt unsafe in their neighbourhoods, they were less likely to use local green spaces.
- The presence of green space alone was not sufficient to encourage use. Participants distinguished between spaces they wanted to spend time in and those that simply existed.

> *"The park is the only place in my vicinity to go for fresh air. This place should be designed for everyone to use. Due to lack of space, younger people think they own the park and sometimes it's very intimidating when the youth are concentrated in the park".*

- Poor maintenance of green spaces discouraged use and created a perception that the space was undervalued, contributing to a cycle of neglect.
- Barriers to green space access were not directly correlated with the amount of green space available. For example, areas with high levels of green and blue space still experienced low engagement due to other factors.
- The need to travel to access preferred green spaces created inequities, particularly for those without access to private or public transport.
- Barriers to accessing nature are closely tied to broader social barriers. Feeling unsafe or unwelcome in public spaces generally translated to discomfort in green spaces.
- Relationships with nature are dynamic and can be reshaped through positive experiences and increased confidence, regardless of age.

"On paper looks like we have lots of green spaces, but you've got regular fly-tippers and the safety aspects... In Bartley Green there is nothing, so these green spaces are vital to us. But we can't use them because of all the barriers and vandalism".

Other national data suggests that:

- Key barriers include perceptions of safety and access to facilities – e.g. toilets and cafes (Natural England MENE survey, 2018)
- People from deprived backgrounds, minority ethnic backgrounds, older people and those with long-term health conditions & physical limitations more likely to have negative perceptions about use and safety (Geary et al., 2023)
- Cultural barriers – e.g. Muslim women need space away from men (Public Health England, 2020)

Local insight highlights:

- A Suffolk Mind Report (2023) – focused on Newmarket noted there were some comments from respondents around how they prioritise accessing nature, but it involving long trips in the car to get there. Respondents commented that having more green space closer to them would improve their wellbeing further and would make it more accessible for other people too.
- Anecdotal evidence from research Suffolk's Green Access Team have been undertaking with minority ethnic groups indicates that lack of confidence (maps / direction / knowledge / facilities / physical ability) can act as a barrier, and that there can be different cultural motivations for engagement.
- Feedback from Suffolk's PRoW team note that anecdotal intelligence from organisations such as PHOEBE, THRIVE and Ipswich Community Media highlights a strong emotional and cultural connection to nature among residents from diverse backgrounds, often shaped by rural childhoods in countries such as Zimbabwe, India, Poland and Iran — suggesting that nature connectedness may be deeper than in some local communities and not solely dependent on current access or provision.

As mentioned previously, Suffolk Coastal Communities (2025) research found:

- Despite the presence of natural assets, some residents highlighted challenges such as poor footpaths, limited public transport, and traffic issues that can restrict access to green and blue spaces—particularly for those without private transport or with mobility issues.
- A lack of inclusive activities and amenities—especially for young people—was noted as a barrier to fully benefiting from coastal communities. This was compounded by concerns about remoteness and affordability.

A couple of examples of guidance that may help promote inclusivity:

- Safer Parks: Improving Access for Women and Girls. This is a guidance document setting out principles for designing and managing parks to make them feel safer, more inclusive, and better used by women and girls, recognising that concerns about safety often limit their access.
- Outdoor Accessibility Guidance. This is designed to help make our outdoor places and spaces, routes and facilities more accessible, and outdoor experiences more inclusive, so they can be enjoyed by everyone.

Prescribing

NHS England note that green social prescribing options are available. This type of social prescribing enables professionals are able to "prescribe nature", and note activities such as local walking schemes, community gardening projects, conservation volunteering, green gyms, open water swimming or arts and cultural activities which take place outdoors are just some potential options(NHS green social prescribing).

- Recent research on the effect of nature prescriptions on cardiometabolic and mental health, and physical activity: a systematic review indicates that nature prescriptions are a promising approach within social prescribing, showing cardiometabolic, mental health, and activity benefits, especially when structured through health or social professionals and institutional referral pathways. However, it should be noted most studies had moderate to high risk of bias, so findings should be interpreted with caution.
- Research led by the University of Sheffield found that supporting people to engage in nature-based activities - is an effective way of supporting people to improve their mental health. The average cost was £507 per participant. Researchers found Green Social Prescribing to be a cost-effective method of supporting people across a wide spectrum of mental health needs when compared to other interventions, such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), behavioural activation, and early intervention for psychosis and collaborative care for depression.
- The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) note that nature prescription is "a free to use, non-medical approach based on accessible, self-led activities that people can do from home, on their own or with others; and that aim to cultivate lasting connections with nature" that has been tested in England and Scotland (over 74% patients said it was beneficial and 87% would continue to use nature to support their health and wellbeing).

Conclusion

Green and blue spaces are more than scenic amenities—they are vital infrastructure for health, wellbeing, and climate resilience in Suffolk. The evidence presented highlights their role in reducing stress, promoting physical activity, and fostering social connection, all of which contribute to better health outcomes and can reduce demand on clinical services.

These spaces also support climate adaptation by improving air quality, cooling urban areas, and mitigating flood risks. As such, they align closely with the NHS 10-Year Plan's emphasis on prevention and place-based care, offering potentially low-cost, high-impact opportunities to build healthier, more resilient communities.

However, it is important to recognise that how green and blue spaces are defined and measured can significantly influence both the findings and their interpretation. Different datasets may include or exclude informal green areas, private gardens, agricultural land, or water bodies, which can affect assessments of access and equity. This is particularly relevant when comparing local findings—such as higher access in more deprived areas in Suffolk—with national-level analyses that suggest the opposite. These differences underscore the need for clear definitions and place-sensitive approaches when using evidence to inform policy and planning.

By investing in inclusive and accessible natural environments—and ensuring that definitions reflect the lived experience of communities—Suffolk can support a fairer, healthier future for all residents, where nature is not just preserved, but actively utilised to improve lives.