

Who doesn't use their local nature spaces and why?

A Green Gap Framework for exploring barriers, challenges & opportunities



Green Gap Framework

Exploring barriers, challenges & opportunities

There are lots of reasons to spend time in nature: exercise, respite, headspace, school run, volunteering, commute, dog walk, hobby, personal challenge, connect with wildlife, change of scene... That's just what around **three quarters of the UK population** has done in the past month - making use of local parks, woods, gardens, coasts and waters, and green and blue spaces in between.

Benefits to people and planet from links with nature are increasingly **evidenced and understood**. There are wins for physical health, mental wellbeing, and for the natural environment too. Nature connectedness is significant for individual lifestyles, for communities, for wider society and at a national level. It's a live - and vital - issue.

But **what about the 25% or so who haven't** spent time in nature? These 'low and non-users' spend **less than 1 day/month in nature settings, or never access them**. They are likely to be too busy, disinterested, ill, incapacitated, unaware of opportunities, or a complex combination of factors. Anyone can find themselves in this situation, however a disproportionate number are females, older adults, people from a lower socio-economic status, with a long-term illness or disability, or from a minority ethnicity group.

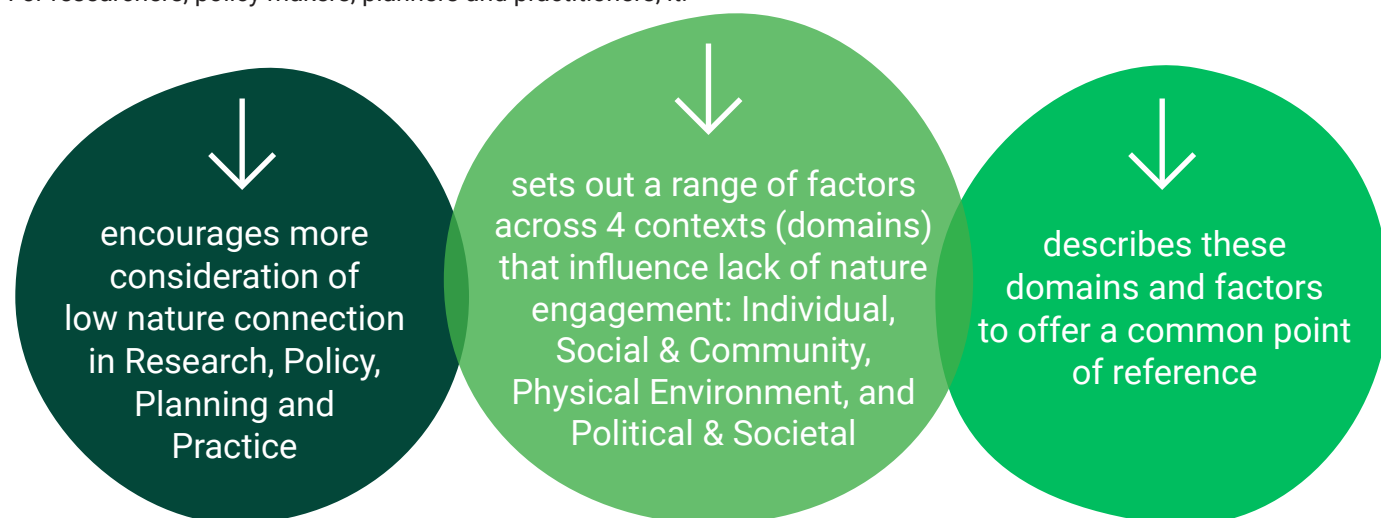
Why does this matter?

Aside from missing out on potential health benefits, these groups strongly overlap with those experiencing higher rates of chronic health conditions. Yes, it tends to be those with poor health, or at higher risk from it - such as cardiovascular disease, mental health conditions and obesity - who seem least likely to use their local nature spaces. On top of that, research also suggests that these are the people who might gain the most significant health improvements from a better connection with nature.

People who demonstrate the lowest nature engagement are effectively missing out on a wellbeing intervention that is potentially powerful, and cost-free. Addressing this can help to reduce not only risks of poor individual health but also population health inequalities. For individuals experiencing socio-economic stress and limited healthcare access, more interaction with local green and blue spaces could offer a significant health boost and serve as an equaliser.

More focus needed

The **Green Gap Framework** prompts more focused attention on who doesn't access nature. For researchers, policy makers, planners and practitioners, it:



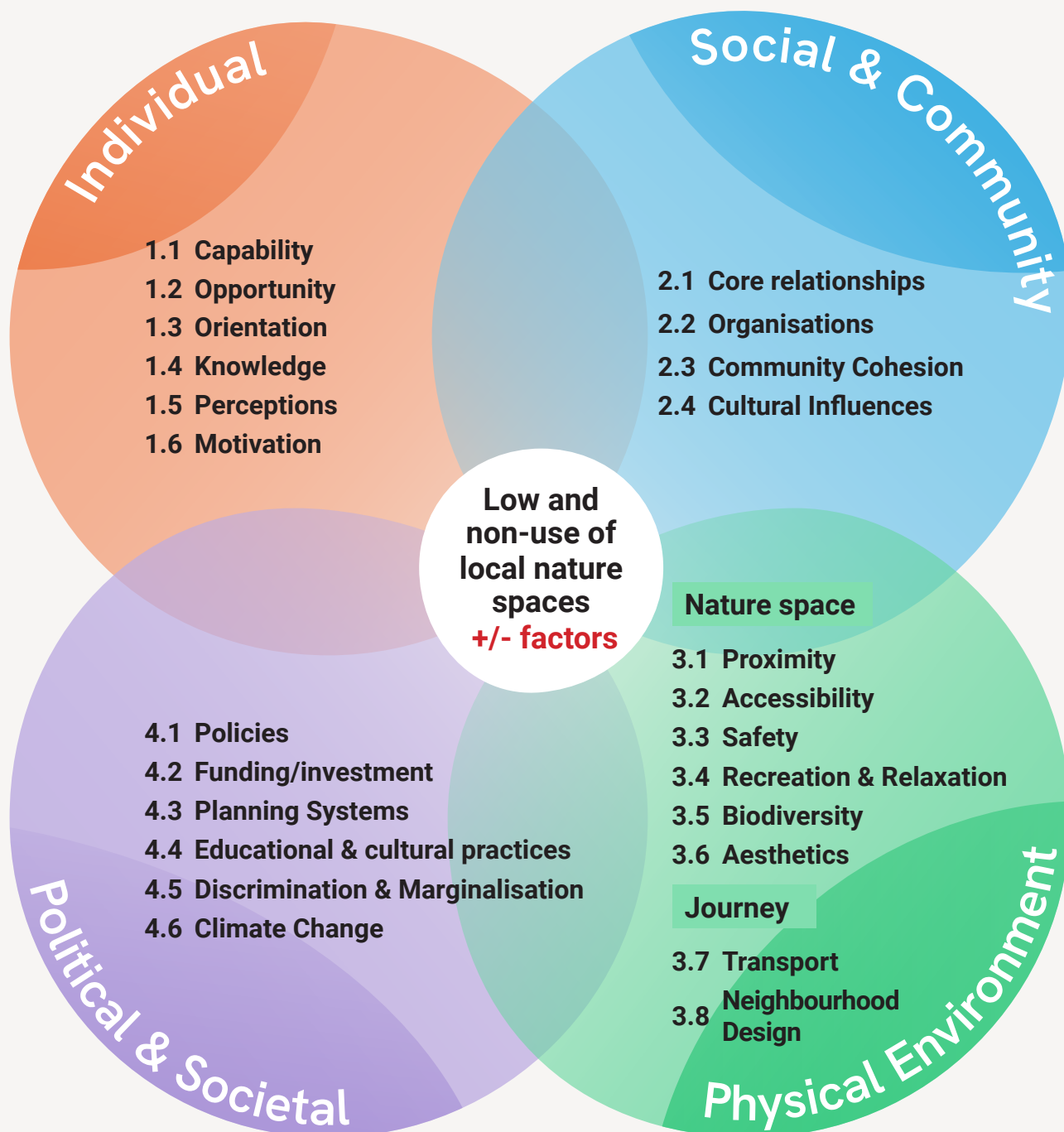
- Detailed discussion: see published article in Landscape and Urban Planning [The Green Gap Framework: understanding non and low use of urban greenspaces](#), April 2026
- The term 'nature spaces' is used to offer a broad interpretation; it can be interchangeable with phrasing such as 'greenspace', 'urban green and blue spaces'.
- Varied studies consistently show concerning levels of low frequency use e.g. [c26% of adults in Scotland](#) visit nature spaces less than once a month; research across 33 European cities noted [25%](#) as 'the share of non-users' of UK respondents who never use urban green spaces.

Green Gap Framework

Exploring drivers & influences on low and non-use of local nature spaces

The Green Gap Framework presents complex, multi-layered influences that affect use of nature spaces. Four domains show a range of factors that can encourage or discourage engagement and/or connections with nature. The focus here is on low and non-use of nature spaces, and on local settings and urban contexts. See Descriptors table on pages 4-5 for an outline of domains and individual factors.

Green Gap Framework



+/-: Each factor can encourage or discourage engagement and/or connections.
Focus: low and non-use of nature spaces, local settings, urban contexts.

Domains & Factors

that drive low and non-use of nature spaces

Individual - Factors unique or particular to a single person

1.1	Capability	Physical and mental ability to visit nature spaces. Influenced by age and health status.
1.2	Opportunity	Perceived and actual availability of nature spaces. Time available to prioritise visiting.
1.3	Orientation	Attitudes towards nature spaces, enjoyment of visiting, feelings of connectedness, prior experiences e.g. childhood exposure, past negative events.
1.4	Knowledge	Awareness of where different nature spaces are located and how to access them. Understanding of associated benefits, drawbacks, contexts.
1.5	Perceptions	Personal views and preferences on aspects of nature spaces including safety, cleanliness, presence of dogs, impact of weather/seasons, aesthetics/attractiveness, biodiversity/wildlife etc. Feelings relating to belonging, inclusiveness, exclusion. Trust and confidence relating to places, people, messages, organisations.
1.6	Motivation	Desire and preference to visit nature spaces.

Social & Community - Factors involving interactions, relationships or activities between people and groups who share something in common

2.1	Core relationships	Key people of influence e.g. parents/care givers, children, siblings, friends, colleagues, educators, practitioners, peers.
2.2	Organisations	Groups relating to education, workplace, pastoral care, youthwork and health settings; their values, practice and interventions in relation to nature spaces.
2.3	Community cohesion	Community-level perceptions of neighbourhoods and nature spaces e.g. in relation to sense of place, safety/crime/antisocial behaviour, transport/traffic. Presence or absence of identity and/or belonging among different groups e.g. intergenerational, interracial.
2.4	Cultural influences	Significance of nature spaces in relation to cultural norms, events and celebrations.

Physical Environment - Factors relating to natural and built surrounding

Nature space - qualities, features, and attributes of natural or semi-natural outdoor environments

3.1	Proximity	Convenience, closeness to home, regular journeys, workplace. Private garden availability.
3.2	Accessibility	Ease of reach, entry, and/or use. Elements can include: paths, steps, gates, stiles, paving, facilities, benches, cafés, toilets, signposting, entry points. Extent to which spaces cater to different and specific needs (e.g. disabilities/ complex needs) and interests.
3.3	Safety	Actual and/or perceived causes or preventers of risk, danger and/or injury. Elements can include infrastructure (e.g. lighting, maintenance, paths) and people-related issues (e.g. crime, antisocial behaviour, consideration of others, dog management, presence of others).
3.4	Recreation & relaxation	Places for play, exercise/physical activity/sport, nature connection. Community assets include parks, allotments and gardens, greenspaces linked to museums and galleries, plus programmes, interventions and events within nature spaces.
3.5	Biodiversity	Variety and presence of natural features (plants, trees etc.) and wildlife.
3.6	Aesthetics	Actual or perceived sense of beauty and attractiveness.

Journey to nature spaces - process to reach parks, forests, gardens, nature reserves, or any other green or blue nature settings

3.7	Transport	Reliability, accessibility, cost, variety, safety and cleanliness of means to get to and from nature spaces e.g. public transport, active travel routes, parking, information. Consideration of varied mobility issues.
3.8	Neighbourhood Design	Presence, integration and quality of nature spaces, including issues relating to 3.2 Accessibility, 3.3 Safety, 3.5 Biodiversity, 3.7 Transport. Consideration of established infrastructure, including both barriers (e.g. major roads, railways, industrial areas) and assets (e.g. rivers, coast, parks, woods).

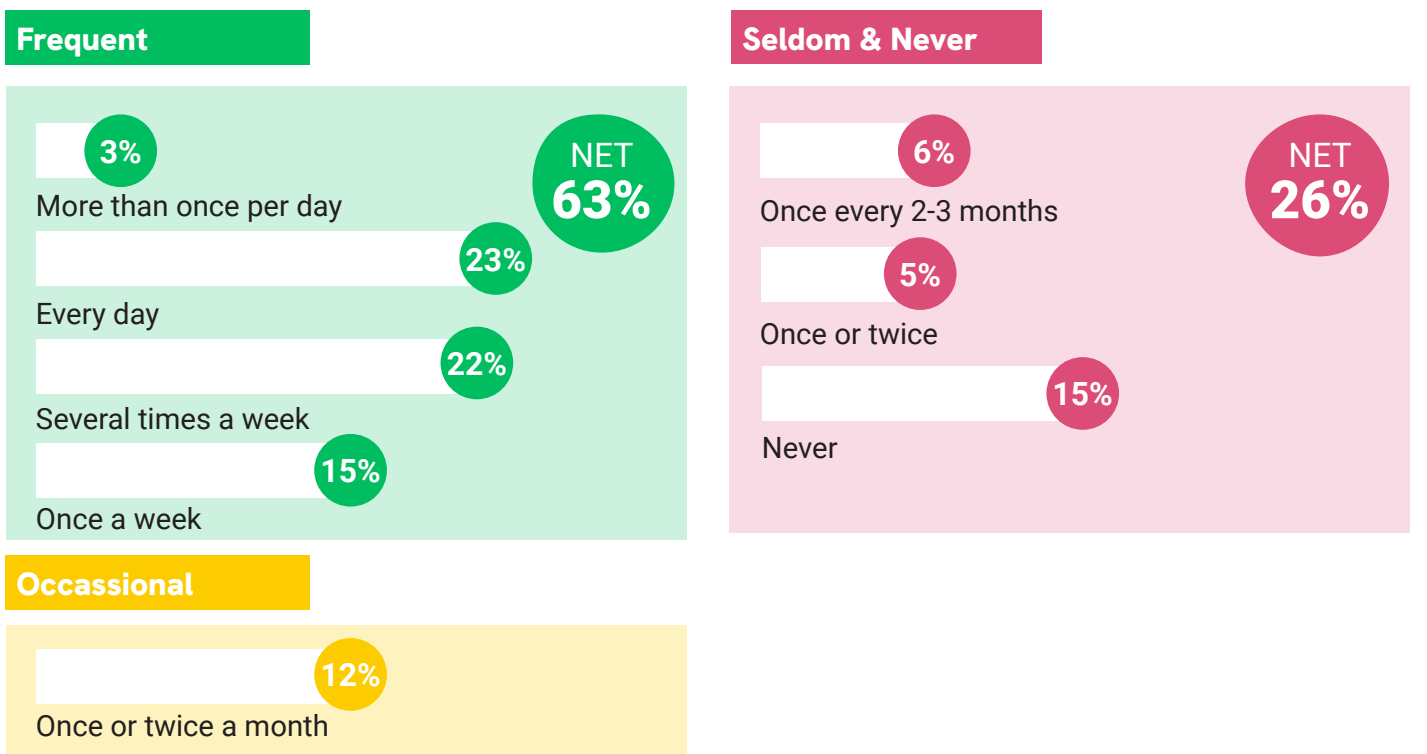
Political & Societal - Factors relating to government, governance and power, how people live together and how society functions

4.1	Policies	Local, national and international policies and regulations that influence permitted building development as well as nature spaces and their use e.g. development and maintenance of greenspace, housing, transport, education policies, 20-minute neighbourhoods.
4.2	Funding/ Investment	Amount, reliability, regularity and equity in financial support for nature spaces, and their access and use e.g. for maintenance/ improvement/ facilities, transport, information/ awareness, participation/programmes.
4.3	Planning Systems	Extent to which nature spaces are protected and integrated in planning processes, and regulations enforced, particularly in large and growing urban areas. Effectiveness of local and national planning frameworks/guidance and staff in relation to nature spaces and their use.
4.4	Educational & cultural practices	Extent to which education settings, systems and stages – at local, regional, national levels, and from Early Years to Lifelong Learning - enable nature connections. Extent to which a culture of using nature spaces occurs at family, neighbourhood, and generational levels.
4.5	Discrimination & marginalisation	Actions leading to differential use, allocation and maintenance of nature spaces across certain categories of people that are unjust or prejudicial, especially on the grounds of ethnicity, age, sex, or disability (including mental health). Such actions can lead to people and groups feeling that they do not belong in these places. Extent to which maintenance, development and design (and associated information) is welcoming, considers diverse users.
4.6	Climate change	Considerations relating to impact of changes in climate, weather and biodiversity on nature spaces e.g. flooding, accessibility, heat, storms.

Frequency of recreation visits & reasons for not visiting nature spaces

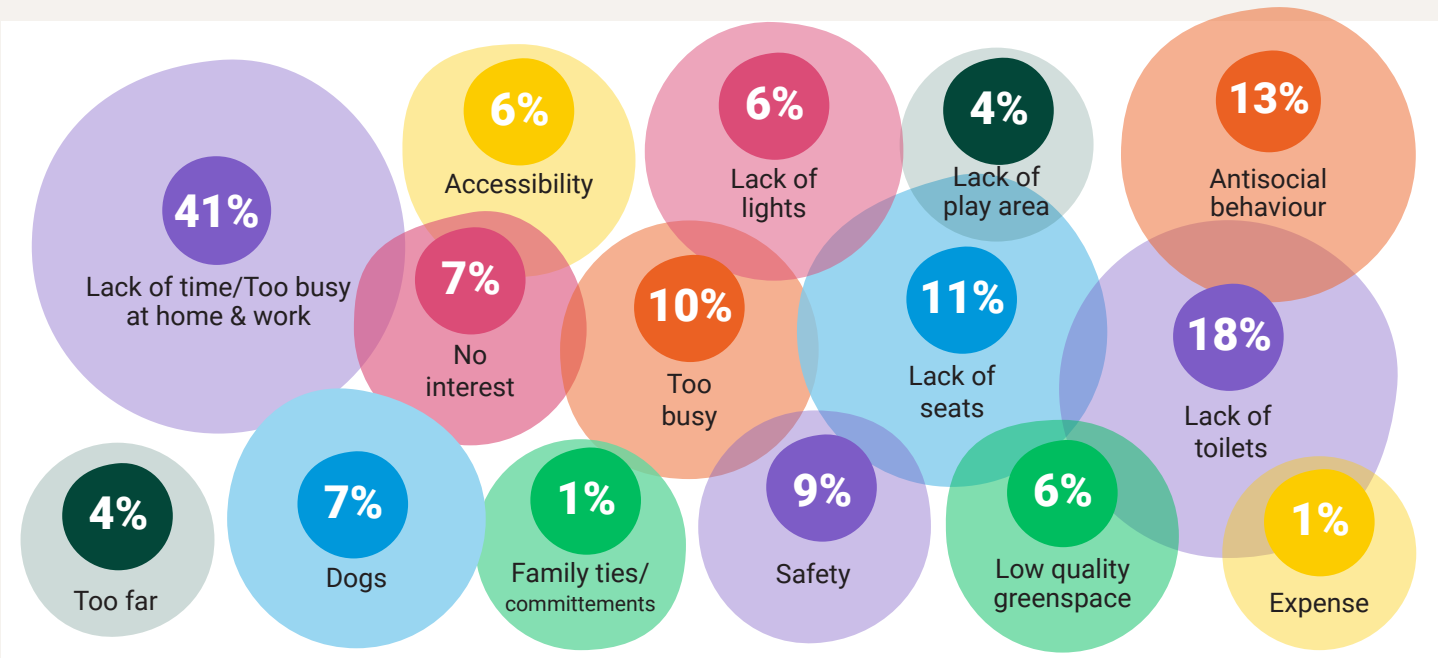
Useful ongoing monitoring activity includes [Scotland's People & Nature Survey](#) (NatureScot) and [People & Nature Surveys for England](#) (Natural England).

Frequency of recreation visits



Scotland's People and Nature Survey 2019/20 – outdoor recreation, health, and environmental attitudes modules. NatureScot Research Report No. 1227

Reasons for not visiting



NatureScot Research Report 1361, Scotland's People & Nature Survey 2023-24

Green Gap Framework

Why use it?

Who **does not** use or benefit from visiting and enjoying nature is a notable gap in research, policy, planning and practice. Deeper awareness and understanding - including how this relates to inequalities in health outcomes - needs a more systematic and coordinated approach.

Who is in this significant chunk of the population that is missing out? Why? What more might be done – locally, regionally, nationally? By who? What difference can better focus make?

A guide to the factors at play, along with resources and examples, can increase interest, awareness and understanding. It can help to highlight issues, to delve deeper, to stimulate targeted action.

Use the Green Gap Framework to

- bring focus to what drives low and non-use in specific settings
- prompt thinking about solutions, connections, contributors – not just barriers
- apply a robust set of factors to produce a thorough overview of complex, interacting issues
- audit and review initiatives and policies
- provide a common reference point across different settings, stakeholders, timeframes
- aid co-design and co-production work; use it as a conversation-starter, a tool to bring contributors together
- bridge thinking across different contexts (domains), from individual and local to systemic and national
- understand what already works, build on good practice
- guide research study design, bring focus to participatory research, structure short- and long-term evaluation
- encourage collaboration across disciplines such as urban planning, nature-based practice, public health
- prompt consideration of missing elements in policy development, implementation and funding allocation
- influence planning processes to ensure natural spaces accommodate needs of all potential users.

For downloadable resources, examples and further information:

<https://groundswelluk.org/GreenGapFramework>



The Green Gap Framework offers a powerful tool to reduce inequalities in access to and engagement with greenspaces, connecting research, policy and practice to drive meaningful action.

Lorraine Tulloch, Chief Executive,
greenspace scotland

Green Gap Framework Applications in Policy & Planning, Practice, Research

Category	Applications
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Policy & Planning	Policy Development	Promote holistic policies that consider and address all 4 framework domains. Target barriers to nature space use. Align urban planning and policies with health and environmental goals.
	Funding & Resource Prioritisation	Justify funding and resources for projects tackling low or non-use of nature settings. Support funding proposals and prioritise initiatives that consider multiple framework domains/factors and align with user needs.
	Planning Development	Ensure plans consider all domains and address all relevant factors. Develop flexible, adaptable, networked, multi-character (or targeted) nature spaces to suit different needs. Identify and prioritise areas for protection, enhancement, or new nature spaces.

Practice	Community Engagement	Inform public consultations, workshops, network discussions. Use hypothetical, targeted personas to explore absence/presence of varied factors. Develop targeted programmes in collaboration with communities.
	Collaboration & Awareness	Build cross-sector partnerships to address gaps/issues with researchers, planners, health officials, community groups, practitioners. Design campaigns targeting diverse user groups and domain-specific issues.
	Capacity Building	Educate practitioners on varied factors influencing use and non-use of nature spaces. Integrate Green Gap Framework with citizen science approaches.
	Evaluation	Develop Key Performance Indicators integrating domains and factors. Pilot and evaluate scalable interventions.

Research	Study Design	Develop testable hypotheses and guide study design across framework domains. Support comparative, longitudinal, and mixed-methods studies by identifying confounders, moderators, mediators and by identifying quantitative or qualitative measurable factors. Inform systematic review search parameters.
	Analysis	Support variable identification for predictive models of nature space use. Underpin systems mapping and causal loop diagram creation. Assess policy impacts on nature space utilisation.
	Interdisciplinary Perspectives	Highlight systemic approaches to understanding nature space use across disciplines, including urban planning, public health, environmental science. Examine origins of inequalities in nature space access and impacts. Inform Patient & Public Involvement & Engagement (PPIE) in research.
	Validation & Development	Facilitate teaching about multi-level influences on nature space use. Prompt validation, refinement and further development of the Green Gap Framework.

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The green gap framework: Understanding non and low use of urban greenspaces. *Landscape and Urban Planning*. 2026; 272:105663.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landurbplan.2026.105663>

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