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# Community hubs and green space

Real world evidence for enhancement of wellbeing

What can practice-based, case study evidence tell us about how community hubs and green spaces can enhance wellbeing in a place?



## THE BIG PICTURE

This review of practice based case studies plugs some gaps in the evidence on how community hubs and green spaces can enhance wellbeing in a place.

Case study evidence provides important and rich detail on these projects and activities, and how they are delivered. This provides policy makers and practitioners with tangible illustrations to refer to in the design and modification of interventions.

[This research](#) identified community wellbeing outcomes that support the findings from systematic review evidence, as well as describing additional and unforeseen outcomes, including those that arise from the benefits of more informal spaces that may not have been the subject of formal evaluations, as well as benefits to the organisations responsible for the delivery of the interventions.

A key theme emerging from the case study evidence was the importance of considering local context and the complexity of responding to local needs through multiple and layered interventions in both green spaces and community hubs. Community involvement in the delivery of projects was also identified as important. This supports the systematic review evidence, which found that community involvement in planning was important for the success of projects to improve wellbeing outcomes.

# HOW DOES CASE STUDY EVIDENCE COMPLEMENT EXISTING SYSTEMATIC REVIEW EVIDENCE?



## On community infrastructure projects in general

Our [systematic review of published evidence](#), found that a range of intervention approaches to community infrastructure can be used to boost social relations and wellbeing in a community. It also identified the importance of addressing the accessibility and inclusion aspects of community infrastructure, including considering how people can get involved in the organisation and planning of projects and through volunteering.

This is particularly important for groups who might feel excluded or marginalised in the community. Creating a safe and friendly environment, reflecting local culture, as well as making the most of skilled facilitators and considering the long term sustainability of the infrastructure were also key common ingredients to successful interventions.

Practice based case studies provide evidence of a range of impacts on community wellbeing outcomes. However, as they do not apply methodological approaches that include the use of comparator groups or quantitative impact measures, our understanding of their impact is limited. Rather, they provide important information on:

- **What such interventions look like in practice:** Case study evidence can explain the development of community infrastructure projects over time, why they were needed, a sense of the 'journey' and who was involved in the inception and delivery of projects. Details on how projects have been set up, including costs and funding, their sustainability and how they are run in specific contexts, effectively provide illustrative examples of the kinds of interventions that the systematic review findings refer to and what this could look like in different settings.
- **The importance of context and community involvement:** Case studies identified some clear themes around understanding and addressing local needs, coproduction, organisational learning, safe spaces and collaborative working.
- **Importance of informal spaces:** Case studies provided insight into the value of more informal spaces for community wellbeing outcomes, aside from the more formally delivered interventions that might be the focus of more structured evaluations.



## On community hubs

Systematic review evidence finds that community hubs are associated with a number of community wellbeing outcomes [\*supported by further evidence found in practice based case studies].

### Community hubs:

- Boost social/community cohesion
- Increase pride in area
- Increase civic activity/participation\*
- Build trust
- Increase individuals' knowledge/skills\*
- Increase social networks\*
- Increase social capital



### Specific to the delivery of community hubs, practice based case studies highlighted:

- Additional community wellbeing benefits: community empowerment, new groups in the community forming
- Additional individual wellbeing benefits: from opportunities for social interactions and improvements in mental health
- Organisational benefits: opportunities for networking and partnership, raising organisational profiles, improved access to commissions/funding
- Delivery: Multiple activities developed, organised/ delivered by range of stakeholders with a variety of learning techniques used to develop and sustain projects
- Unforeseen outcomes: new informal support networks in the community, creation of skills training programmes, 'peer-led' becoming widely appreciated, asset-transfer programme developed, reduction in health and social inequalities as community hubs support disadvantaged communities.



## On green spaces

Systematic review evidence finds that green spaces are associated with a number of community wellbeing outcomes [\*supported by further evidence found in practice based case studies].

### Green spaces:

- » Boost social/community cohesion
- » Improve families' wellbeing
- » Improve individual mental wellbeing\*
- » Improve social relations/interactions\*
- » Increase individuals' knowledge/skills\*
- » Increase social capital



### Specific to the delivery of green space interventions, practice based case studies highlighted:

- Additional community wellbeing benefits: opportunities for social activities and volunteering, increased skills, knowledge and confidence within the community, community empowerment via participant-led activities
- Additional individual wellbeing benefits: gaining employment and a sense of purpose, a transformative change in some people's lives.
- Organisational outcomes, Strengthened organisational capacity, Strengthened or new partnerships, Increased influence or organisational profile
- Delivery: Multiple and layered interventions developed in response to local need and to reach disadvantaged groups, effectively reduce wellbeing inequalities and achieve broad aims of wellbeing and empowerment. Learning processes to gather insights to improve interventions were prominent in some cases.
- Mechanisms identified: building connections and partnerships, asset-based approaches, adapting to local need, community participation and co-production



### The value of practice based case study evidence

Practice based case studies can be an important source of evidence providing rich descriptions of a local context and the complexity of multi-sectoral, multi-level action. They can describe successes as well as unintended consequences, challenges and learning. Typically used to disseminate information about a project or intervention to a wide audience, they can contain information on early or interim results, as well as learning on how to improve implementation. However, there is a lot of variation in practice-based case studies – how data is gathered, reported and disseminated. This makes the data they contain harder to analyse in a systematic way in order to generate more generalisable findings. This research sought to address that challenge by developing an approach to practice based case study synthesis that could be applied to specific research questions. This is useful because practice based case studies have the potential to offer valuable detail and insights that are not usually seen in the published research literature that is typically included in standard systematic reviews.

### Synthesis of case study evidence to complement existing systematic review findings

In 2018, the **What Works Centre for Wellbeing** published a [systematic review](#) that synthesised evidence of interventions that boosted social relations through improvements in community infrastructure; our 'Places and Spaces' review. Fifty-one studies were included that looked at social relations, community wellbeing or individual wellbeing outcomes across eight intervention categories: community hubs; events; local neighbourhood design; green and blue space; place-making; alternative use of space; urban regeneration; and community development. The review found moderate evidence that a range of intervention approaches to community infrastructure can be used to boost social relations and wellbeing in a community, giving stakeholders a range of options. However, important evidence gaps remained, particularly with respect to providing more specific insights into what interventions work in what contexts, due to which enabling factors.

This briefing summarises the additional insights gleaned from the synthesis of practice based case studies that was designed to complement and build on the systematic review findings. The case study synthesis drew on 24 studies. Seventeen were case studies of community hubs, including three newly-commissioned Locality case studies, and seven were case studies of green space wellbeing projects. For more information on how these case studies were identified, developed and synthesized, see the project's full report<sup>1</sup> and associated guidance on applying this methodology. A guide for practitioners on writing case studies is also available.

1 South, J., Southby, K., Freeman, C., Bagnall, AM., Pennington, A., Corcoran, R. (2021) Community Wellbeing Case Study Synthesis. What Works Centre for Wellbeing.



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