



Annual Public Health Report 2021

LET'S GO OUTSIDE: USING NATURE TO RECOVER

# What are green spaces?

The term green spaces refers to 'open, undeveloped land with natural vegetation'<sup>1</sup> which covers a wide range of natural areas in our local environment, such as parks, woodlands, forests and nature reserves as well as other open spaces like allotments, sports pitches and golf courses and private back gardens. It also includes less obvious spaces like street trees, grass verges and land next to canals and railways.



This is my third annual Public Health report as Director of Public Health for Harrow.

The annual Public Health report is an independent report from the Director of Public Health which reflects the local population's health and wellbeing needs. It usually has a different focus each year, choosing to highlight and raise awareness of key health issues or Public Health initiatives affecting the borough. My first report was a set of ward level profiles to show the picture of health at a hyperlocal level. The second was a series of quarterly updates on the work that I and my team had been doing to improve health in Harrow. Last year, due to the pandemic, we were too busy to produce a traditional report but we did produce a report looking at the impact of the first wave of the pandemic and how Harrow had responded. This year we have chosen to look at green spaces, to showcase the many opportunities around us and promote a healthier lifestyle.

The past year has been one that has been difficult for all of us. The Coronavirus pandemic has touched all our lives and has changed the way we work, live and interact with people. It was during the Coronavirus pandemic that many people discovered their local green spaces and the positive effects they had on health and wellbeing during an otherwise very trying

time. As we look towards recovering from the pandemic, we hope that this report is a push to include green spaces and nature in that recovery process, both in our individual lifestyles and on a larger scale within our local communities

This report is therefore first and foremost for the residents of Harrow, who we hope will be inspired by the possibilities listed here to make the most of the range of green spaces on their doorstep as we come out of lockdown. We have tried to showcase the variety of opportunities available in the borough and hope that people find something that excites them.

This report is also for all health and wellbeing partners, anyone working with the public and for those working in service commission and public strategy. We hope that by outlining the benefits of green space on physical and mental wellbeing as well as the greater benefits to society, they will be inspired to enthusiastically promote green spaces to their clients and consider green space in their own projects.

**Carole Furlong**  
Director of Public Health for Harrow

# Ways to make the most of your local green spaces



## Physical Activity in Harrow

**33.5%**

of adults walk to work

**24.6%**

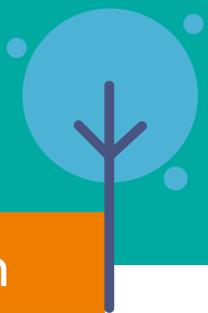
of adults do less than 30 minutes of physical activity a week <sup>[18]</sup>

**1.3%**

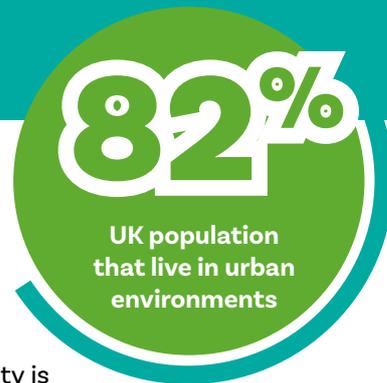
of adults cycle to work at least three days per week <sup>[18]</sup>.

**35%**

of children and young people in Harrow do less than 30 minutes of exercise a day <sup>[19]</sup>.



# Urbanisation



82% of the UK's population now live in urban environments and only half of people in England live within 300 metres of green space<sup>2</sup>. Urbanisation creates various Public Health problems through environmental pollution, accidents and hazards, heat island effects and climate change, as well as by promoting physical inactivity. Physical inactivity is substantial contributor to the growing obesity problem, which is associated with significant morbidity and mortality. Urbanisation also influences mental health with conditions such as psychosis and depression occurring at higher rates in urbanised areas<sup>2,3</sup>.



**Sedentary urban lifestyles have led to increasing physical and mental ill health and its associated effect on individuals and communities are placing an ever-greater burden on our health care system. In order to improve Public Health, we need to focus not just on individuals but the wider determinants of health, in which the natural environment plays a key role.**

## What are the benefits of green spaces?

The benefits of interacting with nature and green spaces can be divided into five broad areas:



Improved Physical Health



Improved Social Cohesion Within Communities



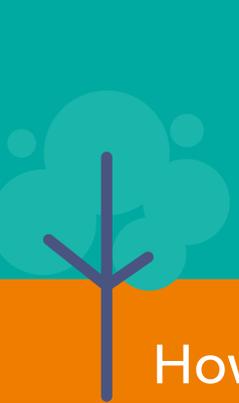
Reduced Health Inequalities Within Communities



Improved Mental Health



Improved Well-being



## How do green spaces provide these benefits?

### Increased Physical Activity

Physical inactivity is the fourth largest cause of disease and mortality in the UK. Being physically active for 30 minutes a day can directly reduce the risk of obesity, strokes, cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes and some cancers<sup>7</sup>. However, 48.6% of people in Harrow are less active than this<sup>8</sup>. Green spaces promote physical activity by providing spaces where people can exercise, for example walking, running or playing sports. Living close to green space also makes you more likely to use it and do so more frequently<sup>9</sup>.

### Stress Reduction

The aesthetic experience of being in a green space can have positive effects on psychological wellbeing by evoking positive emotions<sup>10,11</sup>. Studies have shown that people exercising outdoors report lower feelings of stress or anxiety than those doing the same activity indoors<sup>12,13</sup>. Self-reported feelings of happiness and mental well-being are higher and feelings of anxiety, anger and stress lower in those exercising in nature<sup>14,6</sup>.

### Attention Restoration

Green spaces have been shown to improve cognitive function and reduce stress, mental fatigue and irritability. Green spaces also encourage people to spend more time outdoors and in sunlight, which promotes healthy sleep and increases vitamin D levels, which in turn improves physical health and cognition<sup>4</sup>.

### Social Cohesion and Interaction

Green spaces are communal areas that provide opportunities for social interaction which can indirectly improve public wellbeing by facilitating social networking and promoting social inclusion<sup>15</sup>. They foster a sense of community and belonging that is beneficial for mental health, particularly in otherwise isolated groups of people<sup>16,6</sup>.

### Improved Local Environment

Green spaces facilitate water drainage, absorb air pollutants and reduce heat retention by urban land

## What challenges do we need to overcome to promote green spaces?

### Accessibility

People are more likely to use green spaces if they're closer and easy to access, whether by public transport or by walking [9]. Connectivity is particularly important for children and young people and the elderly.

### Ease of Use

Public green spaces are more likely to be used and by a wider range of people if they have well-maintained footpaths, maps, signposts and amenities such as toilets and car parks.

### Quality

Well maintained and well-designed green spaces are more attractive to the public, whereas spaces that are littered or unclean will deter them instead.

### Safety

The perceived safety of a green space has a significant impact on the likelihood an individual will use it, particularly for women and the elderly who may feel more vulnerable.

### Negative Health Effects

Increased exposure to environmental allergens especially pollen can increase the risk of allergies and reduce use, particularly during hay fever season.

surfaces, thus improving the quality of the local environment<sup>4,6</sup>. The ability of natural spaces to improve air quality by capturing pollutants and particles is particularly important as it reduces the adverse impact of pollution on cardiovascular and respiratory health. They are also effective at capturing and sequestering carbon emissions and so have an important role in tackling global warming. Alongside this, green spaces increase biodiversity by providing natural habitats for wildlife mitigating the impact of urban development on the ecosystem<sup>6</sup>.

### Economic Benefits

By providing widespread social and health benefits to the whole community, green spaces reduce the cost of mental and physical ill health on the government. Green space also increases the value of the neighbourhood and local properties and draw businesses and individuals to the area by enhancing its appearance and liveability<sup>2,6</sup>.

# Health Inequalities

Socio-economic status has a marked impact on health. Low-income areas are associated with poorer quality housing, education and diet and limited access to green spaces<sup>2</sup>.

The cumulative effect of this deprivation creates a social gradient whereby the most deprived have worse health outcomes and greater mortality than the least deprived. In 2017-2019 the life expectancy of the most deprived 10% of residents in Harrow was 10 years lower for men and 6 years lower for women than the least deprived 10%<sup>22</sup>.

Green spaces have the potential to be an important mechanism by which we can reduce these health inequalities<sup>15</sup>. A UK study found that income deprivation related health inequalities in mortality (from all causes and cardiovascular disease specifically) is lower in areas with more green space<sup>23</sup>. Within the most deprived groups, the number of mortalities is halved in the areas with the greenest space<sup>24,25</sup>.

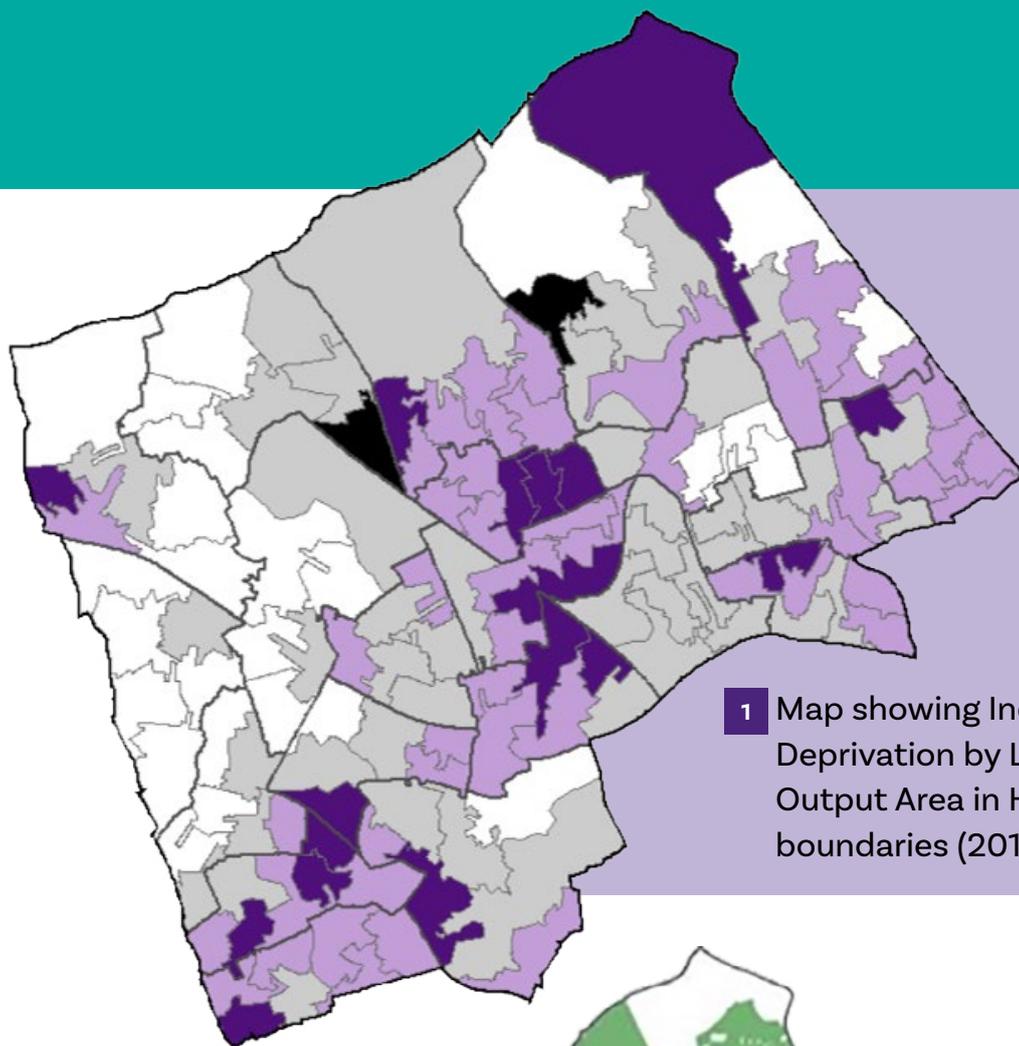
For those in lower socio-economic positions, the health improvement benefits of green spaces can have a significant impact as they modify the pathways by which deprivation causes worse health outcomes. Deprived areas may not be conducive for physical activity or the opportunities limited and the cost prohibitive. Green spaces however promote physical activity and provide an opportunity



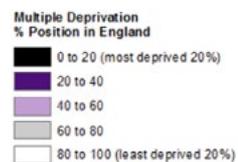
for exercise that is easily accessible and free. Physical activity in green spaces also has greater psychological and physiological benefits than physical activity in other settings, thus potentiating the benefits for lower socio-economic groups<sup>12,13</sup>. Further, the psychological benefits of green space and the impact they have on improving stress and well-being may also ameliorate the impact of the stress of poverty on physical health<sup>23</sup>.

Green space however is not evenly distributed, and is often clustered in areas of least deprivation, with fewer green spaces in the most deprived areas<sup>15</sup>. The most deprived groups therefore have fewer opportunities to benefit from green spaces, particularly as proximity to green space is a key factor determining frequency of use. In fact, green spaces have the greatest benefit when they're within 1 kilometre of the home<sup>26</sup>. In Harrow, there is limited green space in the central and southern areas of the borough, which reflects the areas of greater deprivation<sup>27</sup>. In order to address these health inequalities, we must focus our efforts on increasing access to green space in those areas.

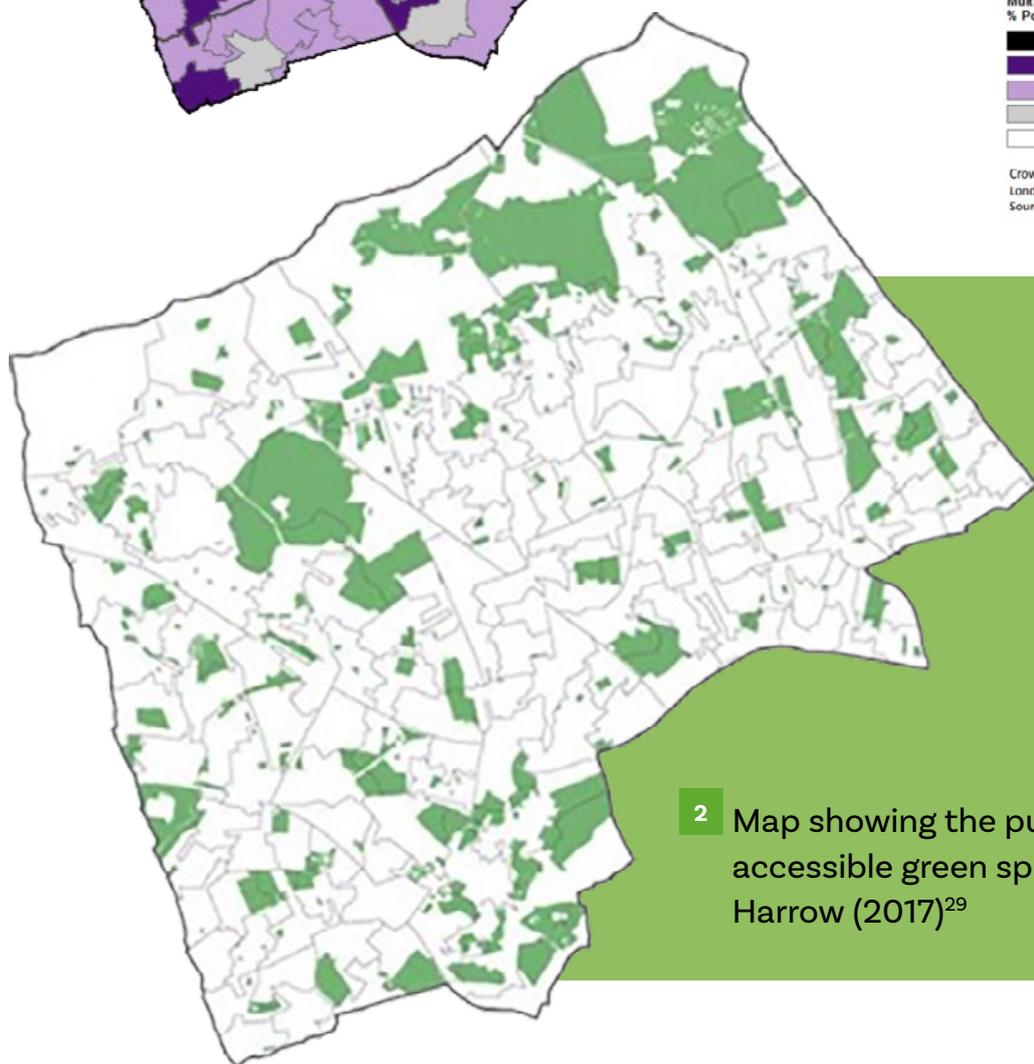
“ In Harrow, there is limited green space in the central and southern areas of the borough, which reflects the areas of greater deprivation<sup>27</sup> ”



**1** Map showing Indices of Multiple Deprivation by Lower Super Output Area in Harrow with ward boundaries (2019)<sup>30</sup>



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Source: MHCLG English Indices of Deprivation 2019



**2** Map showing the publicly accessible green space in Harrow (2017)<sup>29</sup>

# Green spaces in Harrow

Sitting in the north-west of Greater London and covering part of the Metropolitan Green Belt, Harrow has a range of natural spaces and is the tenth greenest London borough in terms of publicly accessible green space<sup>29</sup>. These include parks and gardens, nature reserves, allotments, green corridors, play areas and sports pitches and amenity green areas in and around areas of development.

The smaller green areas are well suited for casual recreation or exercise on a regular basis and have an important role in providing visual relief from urban development.

The large areas play a significant role in community cohesion by hosting events and acting as a social space for groups. They are also better suited for formal and informal sports and cycling, jogging or other forms of exercise. The nature reserves also contribute to biodiversity, nature conservation and environmental education.



In 2015, only 6.3% of Harrow residents had access to woodland, compared to 12.9% for the whole of London and 16.8% in England. The rate of utilisation of outdoor space for exercise or health reasons was 16.3% in Harrow in 2015/2016 compared to 18% in London and 17.9% in England<sup>28</sup>.



## Parks

Parks are designed and maintained public green spaces that act as multifunctional areas for informal and formal recreation, social interaction and community events. There are 28 large parks in Harrow, with many other smaller park areas within the borough. 5 of these parks have been awarded Green Flag status, a reflection of their high level of quality against national standards. Most of the parks have a local 'Friends Of Parks' volunteer group who help support and maintain the park.

In Harrow, these parks are distributed across the borough reasonable evenly. There are a wide variety of activities and events at these parks that residents can get involved in. Outside of these, the parks remain extremely popular for informal and recreational use such as picnics, running, walking and dog walking. Most of the parks have public facilities such as changing rooms, toilets, car parks and coffee shops and are readily accessible by public transport.

## Mental Health

15.6%

of adults in Harrow have a common mental health disorder <sup>[20]</sup>.

4,861

children and young people estimated to having mental health disorders <sup>[21]</sup>.

## Obesity

54.8%

of adults in Harrow are overweight or obese<sup>[17]</sup>

16.6%

of pregnant women are obese at their booking appointment <sup>[17]</sup>

20.4%

of children in Reception were found to be overweight or obese, rising to 36.5% for children in Year 6 <sup>[17]</sup>

# Parks

## activities & amenities

**Health Walks** These are free guided walks by qualified and insured walk leaders through greens spaces in Harrow, occurring every day of the week in all parts of the borough. The walks are of different lengths and difficulties and anyone is welcome to join regardless of age or fitness.

**Children's Playgrounds** Most of the parks have separate playgrounds with facilities for our youngest residents to enjoy. They're routinely cleaned and monitored and are a great way for families to enjoy time outdoors and in nature, as well as being perfect for active play.



**Outdoor Gyms** Many Harrow parks have outdoor gyms, which include much of the same equipment found in an indoor gym but are designed for outdoor use and are free. They can be used by people of all ages and fitness and don't require any experience – just turn up and have a go!

**Sports Pitches** Many Harrow parks have football pitches for formal and informal play. Some require booking but others are open access. Centenary Park also has two floodlit 6-a-side pitches which are available for hire seven days a week. For fans of other sports, several parks have cricket pitches, Harrow Recreation Ground has a rounders pitch, Montesoles Recreation Ground has a hockey pitch and Shaftesbury Recreation Ground has 2 rugby pitches.



**Harrow Skatepark aka Harrow Solid Surf** Located at Byron Recreation Ground, this was one of the first bowl parks in the UK when it opened in 1978 and is one of only two 70s concrete skateparks still operating today. It has hosted several generations of world class skateboarders and had a deep impact on British skateboarding, making it one of the most noted skateparks in the UK. It was recently revitalised and is open free to public from 9am until dusk. With features such as a concrete half-pipe, mini-ramp, bowl and four moguls this is a must-visit skatepark for beginners and enthusiasts alike.

**Pump Track** Recently opened at Kenton Recreation Ground is a state-of-the-art tarmac bike track. With separate loops for beginners, improving and experienced riders, the track is open to the public and is a unique place for residents to have fun cycling. Given the undulating nature of the track it's also suitable for skateboards and scooters.



# Parks

## activities & amenities

**Park Runs** Canons Park and Harrow Recreation Ground are host to a weekly 5km adult park run every Saturday at 9am. Kenton Recreation Ground also has a weekly junior park run every Sunday at 9am. They're open to all skill levels and are free to enter. There is also an annual Harrow half marathon with a course featuring historic and well-known landmarks and many of the borough's stunning green spaces.



**Multi-Use Courts** Several parks have flexible games areas with line markings and facilities for multiple sports on the same court, such as football, tennis and basketball. These hard courts are available for everyone to use all year round and can still be used in wet weather when the grass areas might not be suitable.

### Tennis/Basketball Courts

Several parks have tennis and basketball courts perfect for pick-up games. Some courts require booking, but most are open access. Pinner Village Gardens also has a table tennis court.



**Other Activities** Several of our parks are also host to volunteer led activities such as Tai Chi, Yoga and Nordic walking. With regular sessions held in the park they're a great way for locals of all fitness abilities to get active and socialise with other people in their community. Many of the parks also host community days to bring residents together, for **example planting days and litter picks.**



# Parks

## special features

### Headstone Manor Park

Set within 23 hectares of green space is Headstone Manor, a 14th century manor house and moat. The manor has a free museum showcasing local history, hosting exhibitions, family activities and community events. In the park, visitors can discover the Yeading Brook, woodland and wetland area, and explore the nature trail and walking paths. There is also an annual village fair with activities, artisan arts and crafts stalls and live music, featuring Harrow in LEAFs Annual Horticultural and Craft Show celebrating allotment and horticultural groups and beekeepers in Harrow.



### Roxbourne Park

Home to Roxbourne Railway, a miniature railway with steam and diesel trains that trundles around part of the park, which visitors can enjoy rides on during the summer. There is also a free live music event every Sunday in the pavilion or you can volunteer to help with the nature reserve or community orchard.



### Pinner Memorial Park

Featuring a large children's play area, museum, bowling green, duck pond and aviary for budgerigars. There is also an ornamental 'Peace Garden' providing a quiet place to sit and woodland to explore.

### Saddlers Mead Park

Contains a section of the Grim's Dyke, an ancient bank-and-ditch earthwork dating from Iron Age times that likely acted as a linear boundary or means of defence.



### Cedars Open Space

With a children's playground with accessible equipment and separate adventure playground with zipline, swings, seesaws and climbing area, this area is perfect for children.

## Nature Reserves

There are ten nature reserves in Harrow and several other wild open spaces, which are managed by the Harrow Nature Conservation Forum. The sites are a mix of open space, woodland, wetland and grassland, with a variety of flora and fauna. They are perfect for walking and exploring, and dogs can be taken on leashes. There are several nature trails within these sites, with maps and instructions for the routes online, as well as regular guided walks led by knowledgeable volunteers.

The nature reserves are sites of conservation with an aim to protect and improve their biodiversity and wildlife. They often host working parties where residents can help maintain the spaces. They also run workshops and training courses to learn more about conservation, biodiversity and wildlife.



## Allotments

Allotments provide residents with the opportunity to grow their own sustainable fresh produce with plenty of exercise and outdoor activity in nature along the way. They're also very social with a great sense of community and are an excellent way to introduce children to the benefits of gardening.

There are 34 allotment sites across the borough of Harrow. The allotments are rented from Harrow council via their website for an annual fee, though note there is often a waiting list! The allotments are otherwise managed by Harrow in LEAF, an umbrella organisation for allotments, beekeepers and horticultural groups in Harrow.



## Shaw Trust Horticultural Projects

- The Shaw Trust is a national organisation
- supporting people with complex needs or life
- circumstances that act as barriers to work,
- providing opportunities and training to help these
- people gain valuable employment skills. They have
- two horticultural projects in Harrow, one in Canons
- Park and one in Newton Park East. The two sites
- provide opportunities for service users to engage
- in activities such as growing plants and vegetables,
- litter picking and helping the local community.
- The Shaw Trust is also hosting supported
- internships for students with disabilities that
- impact on their current employability. They offer
- holistic support and mentorship to help interns
- develop the necessary skills for employment.



## Ridgeway Community Garden

The Ridgeway Community Garden is a one-acre site in North Harrow which is being developed into a resource for Harrow residents with the aim of supporting and improving their physical and mental wellbeing. It will focus on the positive, therapeutic effects of physical and creative activity, and will aim to offer sessions covering horticulture (including vegetable growing), cooking aimed at healthy eating, crafting, art, creative writing, photography and basic woodwork.

Residents can be referred to the project through the social prescribing service, via link workers based in local GP practices.



## Playgrounds and Amenity Spaces

There are also several other wild or landscaped green spaces within Harrow which don't fall into any of the other specified areas. These amenity green spaces are areas that may not have a designated specific use but are in and around housing areas or separating other areas of land for visual or safety reasons. These include smaller areas of land between streets or residential areas or on housing estates, as well as local playgrounds. They are close to people's homes and so are very accessible on foot, which is important for the elderly and young children who might not be able to travel far to access such spaces. There are over 38 hectares of this kind of green space in Harrow.

These green spaces provide opportunities for informal activities such as recreational play or kickabout games, dog walking or exercise, and as they are so easily accessible can provide more consistent and regular exposure to nature. They also have a significant impact on the quality of the local landscape and the wellbeing of residents, as they are a clear indicator of the 'greenness' of an area. Local housing estates also have managed playgrounds and green spaces for sheltered accommodation or council home tenants with a focus on providing clean and safe green spaces within short walking distance of the home.



## Recommendations

### How can we increase use of green space in Harrow

#### Recommendations for us at the council and led by me Carole Furlong

1. To have a conversation with our residents about how we can use green spaces to make us happier and more healthy
2. To ensure that access to green space is factored into decisions on new developments as stated in the Harrow Local Plan and by supporting a Health Impact Assessment (HIA) process for large housing and mixed-use developments which:
  - a. Prevent green space being lost to construction or new development
  - b. Increase provision of green space within new developments
3. To do more to promote use of green space as a key tool in tackling some of the inequalities within Harrow
4. To support maintenance and protection of existing green space in Harrow in accordance with Harrow Local Plan objectives
5. When resources allow to ensure and promote accessibility to green spaces by improving paths, signposts and information on local green spaces, particularly in areas of Harrow with limited green space
6. To help Council staff to promote the use of green spaces to stay active, and how the natural environment can improve our mental wellbeing”

#### Further Information

– Relevant Websites

##### Harrow Parks

<https://www.harrow.gov.uk/environment-parks>

##### Nature Reserves –

##### Harrow Nature Conservation Forum

<https://www.harrowncf.org/>

##### Allotments – Harrow in LEAF

<http://harrowinleaf.org.uk>

##### Apply for an Allotment

<https://www.harrow.gov.uk/environment-parks/allotments>

##### Harrow Go Green

<https://www.harrowgogreen.com/>

##### Health Walks

<https://www.walkingforhealth.org.uk/walkfinder/harrow-health-walks>

#### Recommendations for you our residents

1. To find out where your nearest green spaces are and how you might get there
2. To get out and enjoy green space as a place to observe nature, to connect with friends and unwind from the stresses of the day
3. To use green spaces around your home more for leisure, exercise or growing, ideally by building into your weekly routine

## Summary

The purpose of this report was to highlight the benefit of green space on the health and wellbeing of residents and has aimed to showcase the opportunities for residents to enjoy the variety of greenspace on offer in Harrow.

Most people will realise that green spaces are an essential component for a happy healthy community, but the Coronavirus pandemic has prompted residents to explore the green spaces local to them. We should continue to build on this motivation and promote the use of green space as an essential ingredient to maintaining and protecting resident's mental health and wellbeing.

By promoting and encouraging the use all the wonderful green spaces Harrow has to offer, we can reduce the impact of physical and mental ill-health on our population. By using our green space better, we can truly build an even more vibrant borough together.

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