

# Research Insights

## Barriers to Accessing Nature in the UK



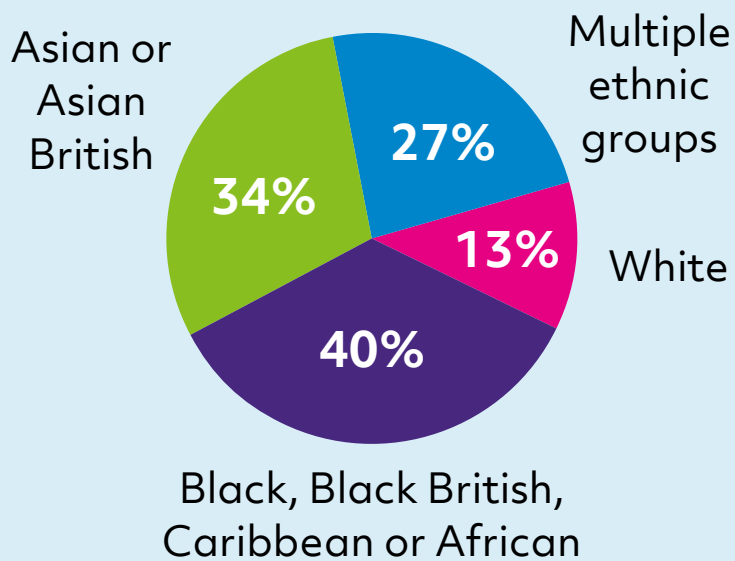
32%

of disabled people report finding it difficult to physically access outdoor spaces such as woodland, countryside or parks (Activity Alliance, 2024).

45%

of survey respondents reported that finding information about accessible facilities at green and blue spaces is challenging (Dawson et al., 2023).

### Ethnicities of people living in the most green-space-deprived neighbourhoods



Many examples of best practice for greenspace design normalise culturally situated preferences for engaging with nature that are most closely associated with **White British ethnicity** (Snaith & Odedun, 2025).

Women are **3 times more likely** than men to feel unsafe in a park during the day. After dark, **4/5** women feel unsafe walking alone in a park, compared to **2/5** men (ONS, 2022).

Younger adults and people living in an urban area are **more likely** to report that they do not have local green spaces within easy walking distance (Natural England, 2025).



## Distance

Only **26%** of adults in the most deprived areas live within a five-minute walk of green space, compared with 38% in the least deprived areas (Dixon, 2026).



## Safety

**52%** of transgender respondents reported fear of transphobia as a barrier to accessing outdoor spaces (Wild et al., 2025).



## Quality

Nearly **1 in 3** people aged 16–24 rate their local green spaces as poor quality (Natural England, 2025).



## Design

To promote inclusivity in access, there is a need to **define and cater for different needs** within the same location.



## Opportunity

Disabled people report significantly **lower perceived social opportunity** to use green spaces than non-disabled people (Cook et al., 2024).



## Cost savings

**£2.1 billion** in health costs could be saved annually if everyone in England had access to high-quality green spaces due to increased physical activity (Public Health England, 2020).

# Barriers to Accessing Nature

The barriers disabled people and people with mental health conditions face to accessing nature are wide-ranging. These barriers are not experienced equally, as people's access to nature is also shaped by other aspects of identity such as gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and socio-economic background. Taking an intersectional approach helps us understand how barriers overlap and ensures that efforts to improve access to nature reflect the diversity of the lived experiences of disabled people and people with mental health conditions.

Barriers to accessing nature can be grouped into five areas:

## Distance

The time, cost, or effort involved in accessing nature presents a barrier.

## Quality

A space is not usable, comfortable, or suitable for sustained use.

## Safety

People feel at risk of harm or hostility in the space.

## Confidence and belonging

People do not feel able to occupy the space without justification; they do not feel a space is 'for them'.

## Design and information

The way in which spaces are designed leads to the exclusion of specific groups.

## Distance

National data shows that people with limiting health conditions are less likely to live close to green space. More than one third of adults whose health limits daily life live more than a 15-minute walk from a green space (Dixon, 2026). For disabled people, older adults, and people experiencing anxiety or depression, longer journeys can be physically and psychologically challenging.

Barriers can be exacerbated when access to nature is dependent on the use of a car or public transport. This is especially the case for low-income households and LGBTQ+<sup>1</sup> people who may feel unsafe travelling to unfamiliar or isolated places (Co-Producing Pride in Nature, 2025). The more time, money, or emotional labour required to reach nature, the more difficult it is to engage with it.

Nationally, only an estimated 33% of households have access to a green space of at least 10 hectares within 1km of their home (DEFRA, 2025). People living in deprived areas and people from minority ethnic backgrounds are consistently less likely to live close to green space (Dixon, 2026; Natural England, 2025; DEFRA, 2025). Black and Black British adults are significantly less likely than White adults to live within a five-minute walk of a green space (Dixon, 2026).

Distance can therefore operate as a form of structural exclusion, shaping who benefits from nature and who is left out.

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<sup>1</sup> An acronym that stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer.



## Quality

Living near to green space does not guarantee meaningful access, particularly for disabled people or people with mental health conditions. The quality of natural spaces therefore determines whether proximity to such spaces lead to safe, sustained use. For example, where adequate paths, seating and lighting are not provided, disabled people and other people whose health limits daily life face barriers to engaging with local green spaces (Natural England, 2025).

Evidence also shows that perceptions and experiences of quality vary across different groups. People from minority ethnic backgrounds report lower levels of good access to green spaces and lower quality of green spaces than people from a White background, and younger people (under 25 years) are significantly more likely to rate local green spaces as poor quality (Natural England, 2025).

Quality is strongly shaped by place-based inequality. Research shows that parks in deprived areas are more likely to be smaller, overcrowded and poorly maintained (Zúñiga-González et al., 2025). This creates a false picture of equality, where communities appear well served by green space on maps but cannot comfortably use such spaces. Spaces feeling unsafe, unwelcoming or not cared for can lead people to avoid these areas altogether (Natural England, 2024). Low usage can then fuel a cycle of underinvestment and further decline of a space.

## Safety

Safety is not only linked to external hazards, but to an internalised sense of vulnerability and perceived exposure. This means that even well-designed natural spaces may be inaccessible if people do not feel psychologically safe (University of York, 2023). For disabled people and people with mental health conditions, nature can often feel unpredictable, and experiences such as being stared at, judged, or misunderstood (particularly in relation to less visible impairments or conditions) can undermine confidence and increase stress (Rishbeth et al., 2022).

Marginalised groups describe experiences of racism, homophobia, transphobia, and gender-based harassment that fundamentally shape whether outdoor spaces feel usable (Abdulla et al., 2025; Wild et al., 2025; NatCen, 2022).

Abdulla et al. (2025) found that 37% of non-regular park users were from minority ethnic backgrounds, compared with 21% from White communities. Participants reported racist and hostile attitudes, particularly when visiting parks in groups, including assumptions about antisocial behaviour. These encounters lead to self-monitoring, stress, and withdrawal from nature. 23% of respondents from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds (not including non-British White groups) said that race discrimination had limited their ability to enjoy nature as they wished, compared to 1% of White British respondents (Fields in Trust, 2021).

Safety concerns are also gendered. Women are more likely to report fear linked to poor lighting, isolation, and visibility, shaping when and how they use green spaces (Natural England, 2024). 52% of women aged 55-64 and 51% of women aged 65+ feel unsafe in green spaces when it is dark (More in Common, 2025).

26% of LGBTQ people agreed that fear of homophobia was a barrier to accessing nature. This rose to 52% of transgender respondents who agreed that fear of transphobia was a barrier to accessing nature (Wild et al., 2025). This limits spontaneity and creates an environment where LGBTQ people, women, and people from minority ethnic backgrounds do not feel that they can occupy natural spaces without emotional or physical risks.

## Confidence and belonging

Access to nature can also be influenced by social opportunity; whether people feel confident going alone, have others to go with, or feel they belong in the space and their wider community.

Imagery of nature often centres non-disabled people, which can signal that these spaces are not intended for disabled people and can reduce confidence to visit (Francis, 2021). Evidence also shows that visiting nature with a companion can make nature feel more approachable for disabled people (Health and Nature Dorset, 2023).

The Chalkscapes Study (2024) shows disabled people consistently report lower perceived social opportunity to use green spaces, alongside Bangladeshi and Black Caribbean/African people and adults aged 50+.

Patterns of use differ across communities. Research conducted by Abdulla et al. (2025) found that White participants were more likely to visit parks alone or with pets, while minority ethnic participants more often visited with family or friends. However, visiting as part of a group was frequently linked to stereotyping and racist assumptions, discouraging repeat visits.

For LGBTQ+ people, belonging is further undermined by lack of representation and norms. Gendered activities and heteronormative assumptions signal exclusion, and 52% of non-binary people said that features such as binary toilets were barriers to accessing nature (Wild et al., 2025). The Co-Producing Pride in Nature (2025) project found that many nature spaces, such as heritage sites, are perceived as “privileged” and “not accessible to everyone”, leading to disengagement from both places and organisations who manage them.

## Design and information

Many barriers to accessing nature stem from gaps in information, representation, and inclusive design.

Lack of public transport, drop-off facilities, and step-free or wheelchair-accessible routes are significant physical barriers to accessing nature for disabled people (Natural England, 2023). However, inclusive design must go beyond physical infrastructure and include information design. A lack of, or inaccessible, pre-visit and on-site information can deter disabled people and people with mental health conditions from visiting natural spaces (Sensory Trust, n.d.; RIDC, 2023).

Where White British norms of engaging with natural spaces are treated as universal, under-representation of people from <sup>2</sup> backgrounds is often misinterpreted as a lack of interest, knowledge or connection, rather than because of spaces being designed without consideration of different relationships to nature (Snaith & Odedun, 2025).

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<sup>2</sup> This acronym, for Black, Asian and other UK minority ethnic background categories, is the terminology used in the research referred to. The researchers’ intention behind using this term is to reflect that these are categories used in the UK Census, the people who claim them are mostly British, and that a “minority” within a UK context is not a minority within other populations (Snaith & Odedun, 2025).

Similarly, design choices around signage, rules, facilities, and communication often privilege users with prior experience of outdoor spaces. Inclusive design requires engaging diverse communities in planning; however, participatory processes are often limited by tokenism and cultural barriers, reinforcing inequities in who benefits from green space (Nguyen, 2025).

Multi-use parks can be overwhelming, leading to calls for quieter, clearly defined spaces that cater to different wants, needs and uses (Natural England, 2024).

These findings show that a single design approach to nature often leaves out many users or prospective users. Without clear information, representation, and spaces that meet different needs, access to nature does not guarantee people will truly connect with or feel comfortable in the space. Inclusive design and communication help ensure that everyone can access and benefit from spending time in nature.



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