

## **Nature in the City of Bees: Greenspaces, Climate Resilience, and Social Justice in Manchester**

April 22<sup>nd</sup> marks the celebration of Earth Day, a day honouring nature and raising awareness of the growing human-made threats our world faces, from climate change to biodiversity loss. The modern environmental movement began 55 years ago in response to the rise in air pollution and its impact on public health and nature, as [twenty million](#) students, workers, and activists poured onto streets across the U.S. demanding government action. As the issues impacting the natural world evolved, so has Earth Day. In 2010, the impacts of climate change, including high temperatures, extreme weather events, rising sea levels and food insecurity, mobilised [one billion](#) people worldwide to demand that elected officials act to protect the health of future generations.

**To celebrate this Earth Day, we at Manchester Community Central would like to spotlight an issue that impacts both local Manchester communities and has a wider global significance: unequal access to greenspaces.** Whether it be a community garden filled with wildflowers and the buzz of bees or the small patch of grass next to the off-ramp of the A6, diverse greenspaces play an essential role in improving the health and wellbeing of Manchester's communities. Despite the large areas of forest and moorlands that dot the surrounding towns, [one in every three](#) Greater Manchester residents do not live within a 15-minute walk of a large greenspace.

Driven by the pressure of urban development, greenspaces across Manchester are becoming increasingly isolated and inaccessible, negatively impacting the physical and mental health and wellbeing of local communities. A recent survey captured the importance that adults across England place on being in nature, with [nine in ten](#) reporting that it makes them 'very happy'. Access to large greenspaces also encourages people to lead more active lives, with an estimated [£2 billion](#) per year in saved healthcare costs if everyone in the U.K. had easy access to a greenspace.

Intersecting with their importance to wellbeing, diverse greenspaces are central to increasing Greater Manchester's climate resilience and adaptation. Greenspaces play a key role in regulating urban temperatures, managing extreme weather events and flood risks, and drawing down carbon emissions. While these local greenspaces contribute to international efforts to address climate change, they also address the growing impacts of air pollution, which is associated with [181](#) deaths per year in Manchester. With the intensifying impacts of climate change and public health concerns, the imperative to provide equitable access to greenspaces is clearer than ever.

Complementing the focus on wellbeing and climate resilience, disparities in access to greenspace must be grounded in considerations of social justice. Inequality in access to these spaces mirrors broader social and economic divides, with wealthier communities benefiting from better access to high-quality green areas. Manchester's tree coverage is

[above](#) the national average; however, access is far from universal, as communities that are racially marginalised are [twice](#) as likely to live in areas with the least greenspace. The same characteristics that affect access to high-quality housing and education—such as age, income, disability, ethnicity, and migrant status—also influence who can access quality greenspaces. These structural disparities, overlaid by the negative physical and

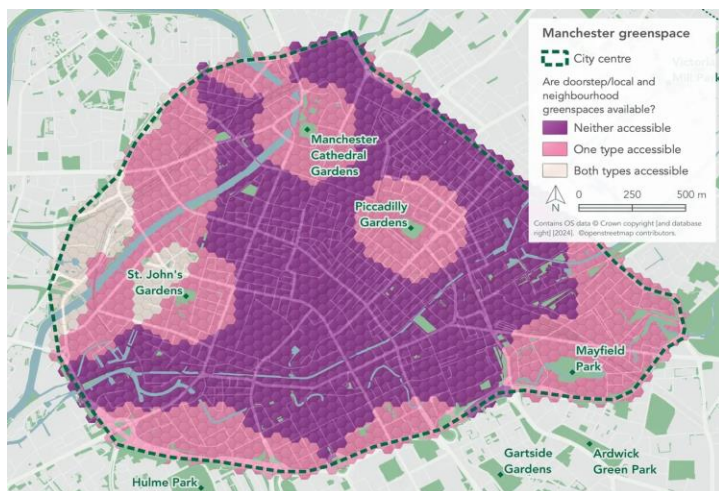


Figure 1: [The Green Gap: why are there so few parks in the city centre?](#)

mental impacts of pre-existing social and economic inequalities, will widen the gap in health and wellbeing outcomes between the richest and poorest Mancunians.

Despite Manchester City Council's positive signals in the recent [Local Nature Recovery Strategy](#), urban development trends emphasise that wealth and social inequalities define access to greenspace. [Green gentrification](#) encapsulates this phenomenon, describing the displacement of

marginalised groups as greenspaces are built in neighbourhoods causing housing prices to skyrocket. This is exemplified by the development of Ancoats Green, a [£3.2 million](#) project to create a large public recreation park. Proponents argue it is a positive step towards promoting nature regeneration in an area lacking greenspace. When contextualised within [Ancoats' recent housing price boom](#) amid gentrification and the displacement of low-income households, this trend reinforces the pattern of urban development excluding socially and economically marginalised communities from accessing greenspace.

On this Earth Day, it is equally important to highlight the possibilities for a greener future across Manchester. Urban planners and policymakers will need to engage in consistent and meaningful co-design with marginalised communities while ensuring that creating equally dispersed greenspace underpins all considerations of housing and infrastructure development. Future engagement with marginalised groups must acknowledge the unique socio-cultural, economic, and ecological contexts that shape communities' relationship with the environment. This means providing facilitated access and working within cultural norms to reinforce the social value of greenspaces that fosters long-term participation in environmental conservation and outdoor activities.

Two recent case studies from Manchester localities demonstrate the participatory creation of community greenspaces that can be built upon given the resources and

opportunity. The first is the [Ardwick Stepping Stones](#) project, funded by the [Greater Manchester Environment Fund](#) and delivered by Ardwick Climate Action. Ardwick, [one of Manchester's most deprived areas](#), had lost [65%](#) of its biodiversity due to the fragmentation of its natural areas. The project aimed to create a network of connected greenspaces from Manchester City Centre to the University of Manchester. Central to the planning process and success was continuous engagement with residents and grassroots community groups who shaped the smaller projects based on the environmental context and local needs. These projects included building small planters to address local air pollution concerns, a small park with indigenous plants, a row of hedges along the A6, and wildflower meadows along the side of roads.



Figure 2: [Action group open Green Route to avoid traffic pollution](#)

Another success story is the [Little Green Social Spaces](#) in Oldham. This project transformed neglected rubbish-filled alleyways in Coldhurst into green social spaces that were designed and maintained by residents. Not only were the initial objectives of the programme shaped by co-design with local groups, but the project facilitates residents' involvement in planting vegetables, environmental education initiatives, and other activities to promote the use of healthy greenspace and community cohesion.

The lessons from these two case studies and [countless other success stories](#) highlight the importance of designing local greenspaces with communities. Integrating nature into the pre-existing physical infrastructure of Manchester will be essential to adapt to the impacts of climate change. Importantly, no two projects will look the same. Creating opportunities for communities to access greenspaces and improve their climate resilience will rely on creating pocket parks, community gardens, rewilding alleyways, reintegrating indigenous plants, and creating green transport routes with trees and meadows lining roads, alongside a multitude of other greenspace layouts. **Promoting equitable access to nature for Manchester's marginalised groups is the cornerstone of enabling opportunities for the community-led environmental and climate action that have driven the Earth Day movement for the past 55 years.**

Ultimately, creating accessible urban greenspaces for all communities in Manchester, regardless of ethnicity, class, gender, or sexuality, depends on the involvement of all Mancunians in the designing, planning, and building of these spaces. On this Earth Day and all the days to come, it will be essential to advocate for policies and projects that explicitly prioritise the creation of greenspaces in low-income and marginalised communities.

**Want to take action?** Explore community greenspace projects and advocacy opportunities in Manchester using the resources below or reach out to Manchester Community Central to get involved.

**Find your closest greenspace:**

<https://mappinggm.org.uk/green/>

**Find a local project near you:**

<https://sowthecity.org/projects%20overview.htm>

<https://www.ardwickclimateaction.co.uk/sites-1>

<https://www.groundwork.org.uk/greatermanchester/gm-get-involved/manchester/>

<https://www.greenchorltonhub.org.uk/groups>

**Get involved in a local advocacy campaign:**

<https://www.manchesterfoe.org.uk/events/>

**Visit Manchester Community Central's Volunteer Centre to get involved:**

<https://manchestercommunitycentral.org/volunteer-centre-manchester>