

Green space – helping BME communities fill the void

A stroll through a park or spot of gardening during the summer is enough to banish even the darkest of moods. But recent research indicates black and minority ethnic communities are disproportionately lacking in such environments - and the effects on residents' health and well-being may be significant. Robert Szmigielski investigates.

In 2010 the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) published a report that revealed deprived inner-city areas have five times fewer public parks and good-quality general green space than more affluent areas.

Moreover, when CABE decided to focus on ethnicity the results were startling. The research concluded that in areas where more than 40 per cent of residents are BME there is 11 times less green space than in areas where residents are largely white.

"For me that was really shocking," said Dr Edward Hobson, CABE's Head of Sustainable and Inclusive Design. "If we had that kind of disparity between police or healthcare provision people would say it's unacceptable."

Dr Hobson vehemently believes it's a serious inequity in society that needs addressing. Together with the conclusions of the Equality and Human Rights Commission's (EHRC) "How Fair Is Britain?" triennial review in 2010, it draws a troubling picture for BME communities in the UK. The EHRC found that children from ethnic minorities are up to twice as likely to be involved in road traffic accidents whilst playing. The body also found that Pakistani and Bangladeshi groups are more likely to suffer from 'poor' physical and mental health.

Lara Oyedele, the chair of umbrella body BMENational, believes that, while the reports cannot be conclusively linked, the parallel throws up some awkward questions.

"These findings are a concern," she says. "Such inequality between available green space undoubtedly has a detrimental effect on residents. In this case the majority are from a BME background. If Britain truly does consider itself to be a beacon of racial diversity and equality, the balance needs to be redressed urgently."

So what is being done on a community level to help rectify such an alarming discrepancy?

Housing associations have been rising to the challenge of providing the green areas many communities simply cannot access. Many are improving the utilisation of redundant land to introduce their tenants to the benefits of nature.

BME housing association Tuntum has been running 'Tuntum in Bloom' for two years. Many of its residents live in inner city areas with little or no access to green space. "There's not that much of a sense of community among some of our dispersed tenants so we try to use green space to bring them together," says Jo Wilby, Tuntum's head of housing.

Similarly, Manchester's Arawak Walton is involved in a TPAS award-nominated scheme, The Green Team, which encourages children aged



'Tuntum in Bloom' has engaged BME tenants and brightened up their communities

between four and 12 to pick litter, make hanging baskets and plant bulbs on derelict ground.

Tenant Sulyn Carranza is an avid Green Team participant. A mother-of-two, Sulyn is pleased to have the opportunity to do something with her family and to make new friends. "It's good for the children because they don't only stay at home. They play among the plants and colours and discover simple things like bees."

However, Maynette Francis, an Arawak Walton housing officer whose infectious enthusiasm helps drive the initiative forward, believes the urgent need for affordable homes affects the decision-making process of many providers when addressing the lack of green space.

"There was a pub where I live that's gone now," Maynette explains. "The local authority could've changed the space into a nice play area for all the kids who are just hanging around outside the shops. But they put up more houses."

In a cut-ridden social housing sector where, according to the National Housing Federation, 4.5 million people are on waiting lists, every scrap of available land is fair game for new builds.

But the positive effects of green spaces should not be underestimated. According to Bridget O'Connell from mental health charity Mind, people exposed to a more natural environment experience reductions in obesity and blood pressure, live longer and have a reduced vulnerability to depression.

"Views of trees increased concentration levels and reduced aggression and violence," she says. "Green spaces possess restorative effects with better recovery from illness, lessened stress and anger and increased self-esteem and well-being."

Dr Hobson agrees. He's calling on housing associations to turn acquired land identified

for new build development to be temporarily converted into green space.

"It would offer residents a considerable improvement on their quality of life," he says. "And if you think of a child's development from the age of two, when they're running around sticking their hands in the earth, until the age of seven, that's a five-year window during which there could be no development happening on a local site."

Often, says Nicola Durrant from Neighbourhoods Green, a partnership highlighting the importance of open space for residents of social housing, the opportunities that green spaces provide are overlooked.

"But many housing associations are involved in exciting approaches to providing excellent open spaces that impact positively on the quality of life of their residents," she said. "In terms of new build developments there is often a balance between using land available for new homes to generate income potential and creating places where people want to live. But it can be done"

Her advice to social landlords? "Start with your tenants; encourage local people to play an active role in deciding what their open spaces would be like and how they should be used."

Dr Hobson thinks there's a false perception in social housing that a space immediately on a person's doorstep is not considered one to be used and enjoyed. "That's quite sad," he says. "Those spaces should be spaces where actually you should feel most able to let your kids play and where you can enjoy just being outdoors."

"And together with the findings of our report, that's a very sobering message for local authorities and housing associations that are responsible for those places. There's a clear challenge to deliver something better for BME tenants." ■