

Participation in Policy and Planning  
2023

# Views from the City: Greenspaces and People

A review of urban  
residents'  
perspectives



# Executive Summary

Greenspaces refer to ‘**areas of grass, trees, or other vegetation, and can be used to describe both surrounding greenness in the countryside and spaces managed or reserved in the urban environment**’ [1]. They provide crucial benefits to physical and mental health, and as such are estimated to save the NHS £111 million each year [2]. Consequently, both independent and government bodies are developing strategies to strengthen connections between people and greenspaces, particularly with those living in urban areas. Two such strategies are the National Parks [NPs] and National Park City [NPC] movement.

NPs are **environmentally significant areas that are protected and maintained for public enjoyment and to preserve biodiversity**. The Scottish Government has committed to designating at least one new NP by 2026.

On the other hand, [Glasgow] NPCs are a grassroots movement to make cities “**greener, wilder and healthier for everyone.**” Glasgow has an ongoing NPC campaign, which has encouraged public participation to establish Glasgow as the third NPC.

For these strategies to be successful, this research aimed to answer the question:

***‘What are residents’ perceptions of the accessibility/relevance/inclusivity/cultural value of NPs and NPCs?’***

It also aimed to develop evidence-based recommendations for the Scottish Government and the Glasgow National Park City campaign, who are both seeking to engage stakeholders with designation and management.

**Thirty-four urban residents** in Edinburgh and Glasgow were interviewed to gain an insight into their perceptions of both NPs, the NPC concept, and urban greenspaces. Over **80% of participants had been to at least one of the two Scottish NPs** - the Loch Lomond and The Trossachs NP and the Cairngorms NP - with just over **half also reporting that they use urban greenspaces to enhance their wellbeing**.

The recommendations developed were based on issues raised by participants, grouped into four primary themes:

## **Uses, Cultural Values, Accessibility, and Engagement/Participation**

Key recommendations include to:

Establish **additional channels of communication** to **proactively engage** the public with the NP designation plans and process, and the ambition to implement NP values in cities

Capitalise on the **place-based attachments** people in Scotland feel towards the NPs and greenspaces

Prioritise **engaging with diverse communities** to address issues of inequitable access and use

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# Introduction and Background

NPs feature centrally in Scotland's vision for a sustainable future (Figure 1). Following the Bute House agreement, the Scottish Government are taking action to build a greener and fairer Scotland. This includes pledging to designate a new NP by 2026, focusing on community engagement and developing stakeholder-driven proposals.

While this designation has received country-wide interest, rural stakeholders dominated engagement in the consultation in 2022 [3]. As urban areas house 71% of Scotland's residents [4], understanding how urban residents view and value NPs is important to shape future designations.

In addition to the designation of a new NP, there is an ongoing campaign for Glasgow to become a NPC. NPCs aim to integrate the core values of NPs into cities, inspiring a shared vision of the city as 'greener, wilder and healthier for everyone' [5], where people, places and nature are better connected (Figure 2). While the NPC foundation hopes to have designated 25 NPCs by 2025, there are currently only two NPCs in the world (London and Adelaide). The Glasgow campaign focuses on getting more support from the public and encouraging their involvement to establish Glasgow as one of the next NPCs [6].

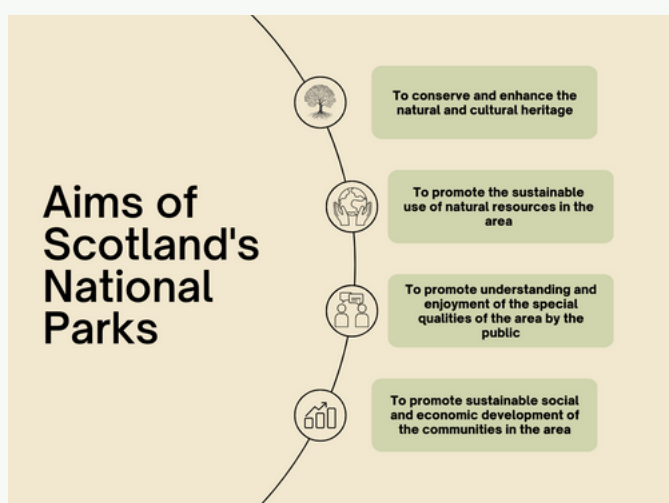


Figure 1: Aims of Scotland's National Parks



Figure 2: Aims of Glasgow National Park City Campaign

For NPs and NPCs to be successful, the Scottish Government and the Glasgow NPC campaign need a greater understanding of what Scotland's urban residents value about greenspaces – both in their local areas and further afield.

Figure 3 shows five common themes both organisations are interested in understanding.

This research – undertaken by MSc Students from the University of Edinburgh – conducted thirty eight interviews on behalf of both actors to explore Edinburgh and Glasgow residents' views towards NPs and NPCs.



Figure 3: Five Common Themes of Interest

To satisfy the aims of both organisations we designed the following research questions, based on our identified common themes:

1. How do people use national parks/greenspaces?
2. How do people relate to greenspaces?
3. What are the barriers to accessing national parks?
4. To what extent do people feel like they have a voice?
5. What would people like for the future of their NPs and NPCs?

# Methodology

## Stakeholder Identification and Recruitment

The study focused on engaging with residents in Edinburgh and Glasgow, Scotland's two major urban centres. Researchers emailed a selection of Edinburgh and Glasgow Residents' Associations to recruit participants – chosen because members likely know local views and issues – however, this was broadened given minimal responses, and various community groups were also contacted. Additional participants were recruited using referrals from those already participating (snowball sampling). Participants from across Glasgow and Edinburgh (See Figures A1 and A2) were provided with an information sheet and a consent form prior to the meeting.

## Interview Design

Researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with participants, allowing pertinent ideas to be explored as participants were able to provide open-ended responses. The interview questions focused on three key areas: the participant's interpretation of and experience with NPs, their relationship with nature within their city, and how they would like the environment of Scotland to be in the future. The interview format was designed to avoid any jargon, allowing people to share their personal views and experiences. Interviews were conducted and recorded over a period of 30-60 minutes either in person or online using a virtual meeting platform (Zoom or Teams).

## Analysis

Interviews were transcribed and analysed to identify key themes relevant to our research. This included identifying keywords (descriptive codes) and placing these within broader themes (analytic codes) relevant to the overarching research aims.

### Identified Key Themes include:

**Usage, Cultural Values, Accessibility, and Engagement and Participation**

## Recommendations

Recommendations for improved stakeholder engagement and suggested improvements to NPs and NPCs were developed from the analysis.

# Findings

## Theme 1: How do urban residents use greenspaces?

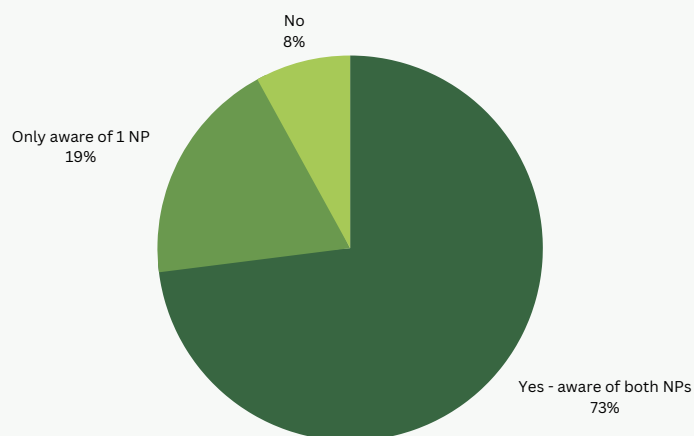


Figure 4: Awareness of Existing NPs in Scotland

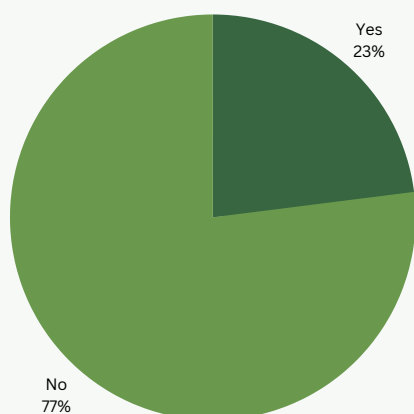


Figure 5: Awareness of Plans for New NP Designation

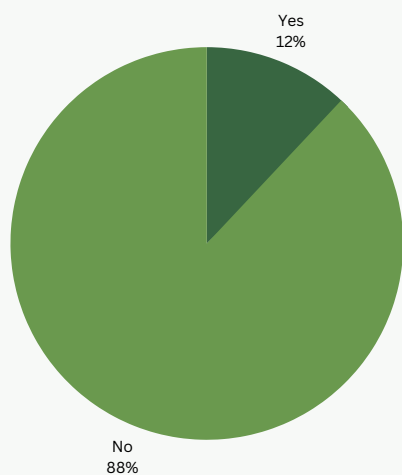


Figure 6: Knowledge of NPC

### Knowledge of NPs and NPCs

A central goal of the semi-structured interviews was to understand urban resident's knowledge and awareness regarding Scotland's NPs. While 24 participants out of 34 had previously heard of both NPs (Figure 4), the majority of interviewees were unaware that Scotland is designating a new NP by 2026 (Figure 5), and even fewer had heard of a NPC (Figure 6).

### Use of NPs

Between both NPs, Loch Lomond and the Trossachs was more frequently visited by participants (Figure 7). Most visitation of this park was related directly to the loch and its environs (such as Balloch, Luss, and Ben Lomond), rather than the entire area of Loch Lomond and the Trossachs. Stakeholders were also asked which greenspaces outside the cities of Glasgow and Edinburgh they use (see Figure A3).

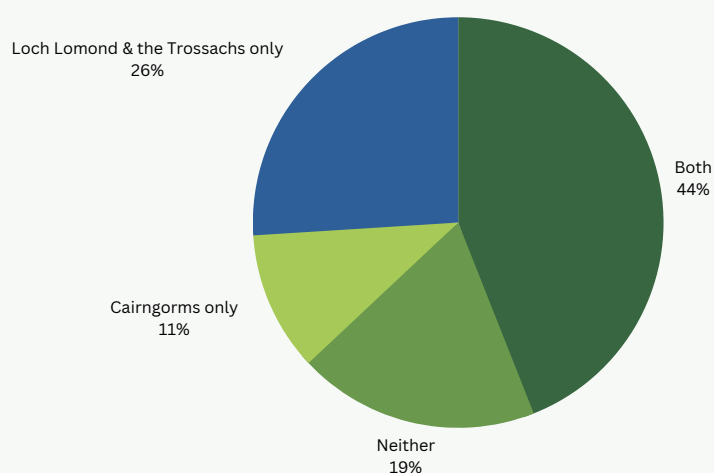


Figure 7: NPs Visited by City Residents

### Use of Urban and Rural Greenspaces

Participants use urban greenspaces (within the boundaries of Glasgow and Edinburgh - see Figures A4 and A5) and rural greenspaces (National, Country, and Regional Parks or other areas of recreation in the countryside) for a range of activities and purposes (Figures 8 and 9).

Wellbeing uses include physical and mental health, such as recreational cycling, hillwalking, and leisure, and was the most common category for usage. The social category includes activities to spend time with friends and family. Practical purposes primarily consist of commuting to work or traveling through areas, and stewardship includes activities such as community gardening or clean-up.

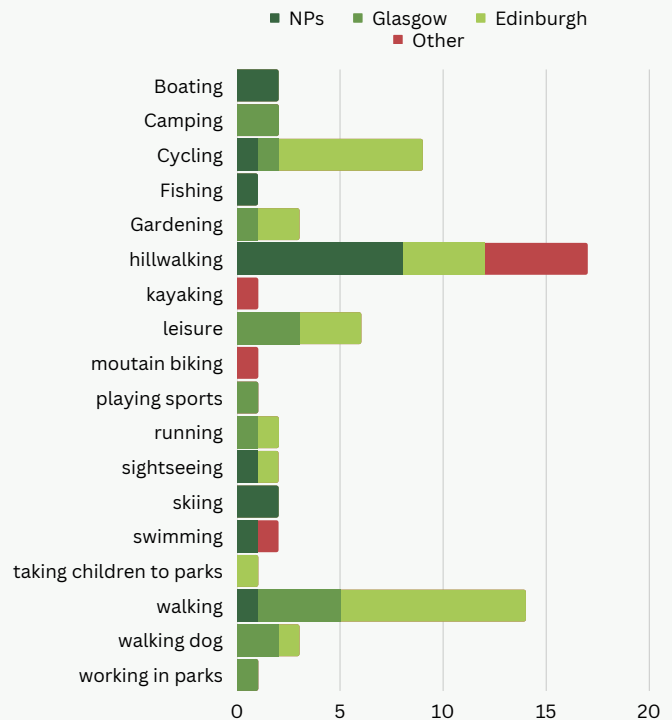


Figure 8: How Participants Use Greenspaces in Cities

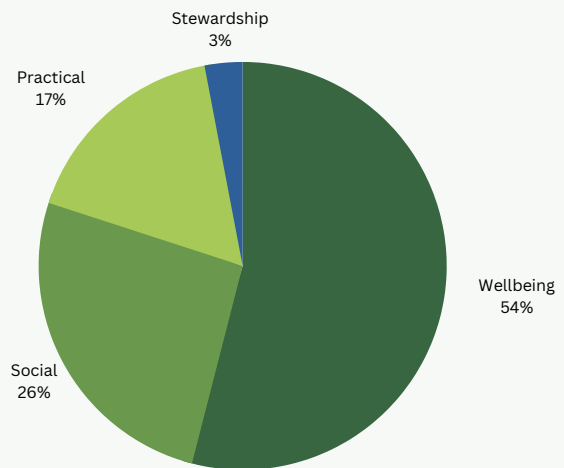


Figure 9: Participant Purposes for Greenspace Use

## Theme 2: Cultural Value

### INTRODUCTION

Cultural values are the core principles, beliefs or ideals which are informed by a particular culture and shared amongst its members [7]. We found NPs and other greenspaces in Scotland to be culturally relevant and significant amongst participants, incorporated into their identities as Scottish residents. These spaces were valued for their opportunities to connect with others and with nature itself, improve mental and physical health, and as quiet havens for relaxation and contemplation. For urban residents, the ability to escape from the city to enjoy nature is a particularly important aspect of areas like National Parks. Participants emphasised the importance of preserving these culturally important areas, some of which are perceived to be threatened by development, so they can continue to be enjoyed by current and future generations. Multiple interviewees identified NP landscapes such as the Trossachs and Loch Lomond as a fundamental part of their Scottish heritage.

## KEY FINDINGS

### **Identity, belonging, and place attachments**

Relations to personal and cultural identities, as well as place-based attachments to urban greenspaces and NPs were mentioned by 18 interviewees. NPs and their associated landscapes are considered culturally important features of Scotland which participants want preserved not only for use by Scottish residents but also to share these experiences and places with others.

“it’s probably true of the Trossachs and Loch Lomond as well, but like those landscapes are quite ingrained in Scottish culture... I think there is a deep-down sort of I don’t know, like relationship with it because it’s so firmly part of the culture of Scotland”

“We’ve got to protect what we’ve got. I mean, people actually come to Scotland because it’s a nice country. Nature wise, scenery wise, you know”

With regards to greenspaces in cities, many voiced concerns about losing these areas to development, as well as identified them as crucial parts of their city and their personal identities.

“...it’s, I think, an essential part of Edinburgh’s character to have these places not to build on”

“If they weren’t here, I probably wouldn’t live here. I think it’s a big part of who I am”

Participants also stressed the relevance of these areas for enjoyment by past, current and future generations, speaking about them with both nostalgia and hope regarding their futures.

“I have a tree. I lost a wee grandson and that’s what we’ve done. Planted a tree... It’s gonna be on the earth... trees are hundreds and hundreds of years old so that’s, it’s just a memory thing”

“we can’t keep building up... we need to give space for the next generation to enjoy, to see the squirrels or the flowers or even to realize nature is there”



## INTRODUCTION

Many of the interview participants discussed the accessibility of NPs rather than the greenspaces within their cities. However, transport was an overarching challenge across the different contexts mentioned. Despite these challenges, residents do still access Scotland's NPs and city greenspaces when they are able to. "...Loch Lomond and the Cairngorms are busy compared to a lot of other outdoor spaces in Scotland because of the National Park status, but I don't think that's necessarily a bad thing".

## KEY FINDINGS

### **Within the city**

Residents of both Glasgow and Edinburgh acknowledged that not all greenspaces within their cities are created equal, and that not all areas within their cities have that space to begin with.

"A lot of parks are private, so, although there is a lot of greenspace in the city there could be more"

"a real lack of investment in [Edinburgh's affluent] public spaces"

Participants from Glasgow associated well-used and well-maintained park space with more affluent areas of their cities. And with that, greater accessibility. Less affluent areas were described as experiencing a lack of investment. Participants from Edinburgh, however, described the opposite. Greenspaces in more affluent areas of the city were described as being largely devoid of infrastructure like children's play areas, comfort facilities, and cycle paths.

Similarly, there were contrasting views when it came to the quality of infrastructure available to support residents in accessing the greenspaces in their areas. While there was some demand for improving the "*shockingly bad...cycle paths*", particularly in Edinburgh, other participants who use cars to access greenspaces reflected that a NPC 'redesign' of transportation infrastructure could create additional challenges for reaching these areas within and outside of their cities.

### **Outside the city**

"I feel like access to the National Parks could be better"

Not everyone is able to access NPs without a car, or they feel pressure to have a car. This is one of the primary barriers to accessing National Parks from Glasgow or Edinburgh.



Where public transportation is available to the NPs, participants described it as insufficient, expensive and confusing, creating a different dimension of inaccessibility of those spaces. Generally, there is a lack of buses consistently running to and between the NPs, and trains stop running relatively early in the day. This limits opportunities for full-day park excursions. Further, residents may be left with no access to the Parks at all.

“Yeah Glasgow specifically like, I’d say like the proximity to the Trossachs in general is a really good thing. I think most Glaswegian’s are aware that Loch Lomond is actually, you know, 50 minutes away by car. So I think in general it’s quite a positive thing”

“I think the public transport is poor and so to get to a lot of them you need to do is have your own car or someone else who use you knows car and which is quite, well, it’s limited for a certain part of the population but also not great for fuel usage”

“So maybe some area is not very much accessible to the public. Maybe some of them are, you know, easy but I don’t know how they are located”

“Our transport network always feels a bit like broken biscuits”

If links between cities and the NPs were to be created, participants communicated that they would like to see creation of “*regular buses*” or other transportation options “*so people who are in the cities can go out and experience the wildness of the countryside if they want to*”. Any newly created or expanded networks would need to be well advertised and those systems designed to be easily navigated by any user regardless of their “*physical capabilities*”.



# Theme 4: Engagement/Participation

## INTRODUCTION

Participants noted a variety of barriers to participation. These barriers included a perceived lack of knowledge in participatory processes and in NPs/NPCs themselves, as well as a lack of trust in government and local councils, and a lack of diverse voices within the consultation process. Generally, participants were wary of current participatory processes and consultations due to feeling their opinions weren't being taken into consideration.

## KEY FINDINGS

**1** The first clear barrier to participation expressed by the participants was a **perceived lack of knowledge of participatory events, processes, and consultations**. Most participants either did not know about participatory processes and consultations on greenspaces or had difficulty accessing them. Participants generally felt removed from public participation. There was a general perception that participatory processes were overly complicated, time-consuming, and hard to find out about.

**2** A second barrier to participation expressed by participants was a **perceived lack of knowledge of NPs and NPCs**. While participants had a lot to share regarding both greenspaces and NPs, many expressed hesitation in involving themselves in participatory processes due to a perception that they lacked expertise on the subject. As one participant said, *"I feel like I don't know enough about their policies to provide enough of an educated opinion"*.

**3** A third barrier to participation was a general **lack of trust in the government**, and more specifically, in local councils. This is not unique to Edinburgh/Glasgow, a study on global trust shows a trend that trust in government has diminished in the majority of countries. In the UK it is down 5 points from last year [8]. Many participants felt that their voices were either not heard or did not matter in government decision-making. As one participant said, *"our local councils [...] quality has diminished a lot so I don't trust the council to do everything"*.

**4** The last barrier to participation was a **perceived lack of diverse voices** in participatory processes and decision-making. Participants felt there was a lack of youth, immigrants, working class, and disabled voices within the participatory process. There was a concern for *"National Park Cities only actually being for middle class people"*.

"I feel like I don't have a say"

"I feel like I don't know enough about their policies to provide enough of an educated opinion"

"the best way to conserve the environment is through giving people the agency and the ability to worry about it themselves"

"our appeals seem to fall on deaf ears"

"Who's being consulted?"

"[getting my voice heard is] easy for me but it's not easy for other people"

# Discussion

The various ways urban residents engage with and value greenspaces inform their relationships with NPs and NPCs. A significant proportion of respondents were aware of Scotland's current NPs than they were of the Scottish Government's upcoming designation. The diversity of activities interviewees reported undertaking in NPs demonstrates the relevance of these spaces for urban residents. Cycling and walking were popular activities within Edinburgh and Glasgow, whilst residents were more likely to travel to NPs for hillwalking, boating, fishing, mountain biking, sightseeing, and swimming. Furthermore, beyond these recreational uses and their associated physical health benefits, respondents expressed greenspaces also provide them with significant mental health benefits, particularly related to escaping the stress and business of the city.



Despite the Scottish Government's consultation on new National Parks [9], our results indicate that there may not be enough awareness among Edinburgh and Glasgow residents about the upcoming designation. An even bigger proportion of interviewees demonstrated no awareness about the concept of an NPC, demonstrating that further effort is required to publicize both the 2026 NP designation and the Glasgow NPC Campaign, as well as demonstrating the ways in which NP values and purposes could be applied to a city.

Amongst Edinburgh and Glasgow residents, Loch Lomond and the Trossachs seems to be a far more popular destination than the Cairngorms, likely due to distance and transport-related accessibility. Within Loch Lomond and the Trossachs, visitation is primarily to the Loch itself, likely due to the concentrated availability of recreational activities in this area closer to the city.

The importance of NPs to Scottish cultural identity has multiple implications for the designation of the next NP. One interpretation is that the next NP should be designated in a place of cultural significance to the people of Scotland to sustain the place-based attachment to NPs. Another is that there is opportunity for the next NP to enhance Scottish people's connection to that place by signalling its importance to Scotland. However, it should be noted the cultural importance of these places is based on their preservation of natural landscapes rather than their official NP recognition.



# Recommendations

This research has provided several recommendations for managing and improving greenspaces and engaging with greenspaces, which are described below and outlined in Table 1.



Interviewees emphasized the need to protect areas through the NP designation for the use and pleasure of future generations. Another key takeaway is that the next NP should be designated with the objectives of long-term landscape preservation. The use and significance of NPs were of particular importance. Due to this, the next NP should be designated for human enjoyment and conservation.



The accessibility of NPs and NPCs is important to consider, referring to physical accessibility, as well as its less tangible forms, such as perceived inclusion in consultation processes. Enhancing public transportation within and outside the cities can help overcome barriers to accessibility across different demographics. People without a car or driving licence, for example, have the most to gain from well-established connections to and within NPs. This increased accessibility can facilitate more sustainable attitudes and behaviour amongst urban residents.



Insufficient awareness of the NP designation process and the objectives of NPC classification highlight challenges related to public engagement, especially given participants' enthusiasm to participate. The findings in this report align with that of the 'Analysis of Responses to Public Consultation' report on the 'Net Zero Nation' consultation, which found it pressing to remove barriers to participation [10]. Participants communicated needs for the following: (1) better publicized local and community consultations; (2) increased transparency in reports, plans, budgets, and consultations, making them easier to understand and get involved in; (3) less time-consuming consultations for more inclusive participation; and, (4) a more significant say in planning stages of policymaking.



Enhancing connections with NPs and NPCs can be facilitated through engaging with residents' personal lived experiences. Many interviewees felt they could not make claims about the state of Scotland's NPs, or their preferred role for NPCs to take in their city, due to a perceived lack of expertise. Policymakers and NPC facilitators can connect with the public by capitalizing on lived experiences as a form of local knowledge and expertise, helping community members find value in voicing their opinions on the improvement and protection of their natural environment.

Theme	Objectives	Recommendations
Usage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prioritise the protection of Scottish wildlife</li> <li>• Recognise the dual use of NPs and greenspaces as places for improving wellbeing and practicing stewardship (through conservation activities)</li> <li>• Connect users with the innate value of nature</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Make conservation practices relevant to the particular area being protected (taking into account local flora and fauna and current issues in Scottish wildlife protection)</li> <li>• Proactively engage with the urban public to influence pro-environmental behaviour and attitudes</li> <li>• Develop educational materials and interactive excursions to establish first hand connection with remote, wild, and biodiverse places</li> </ul>
Accessibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Further research gaps in public transport to facilitate equal access to NPs and prevent overuse of key arrival points</li> <li>• Prioritise engaging with diverse communities to address issues of inequitable access and use</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase efforts to map public transport networks from cities to NPs and greenspaces and take steps to address any gaps</li> <li>• Consider an integrated transport system network between cities and remote greenspace areas</li> <li>• Distribute resources towards facility development at different access points</li> <li>• Utilise existing work conducted by grassroots organisations to promote successful solutions</li> <li>• Focus on improving pedestrianisation and cycling infrastructure to enhance greenspace connectivity</li> </ul>
Cultural value	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop public connections with nature by embedding the vision of nature and culture as one</li> <li>• Capitalise on the place-based attachments people in Scotland feel towards the NPs</li> <li>• Make use of the ability of NPs to provide spaces for mental reset, escapism, and re-connecting with nature</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish community schemes and support existing initiatives to further foster urban-nature connectivity</li> <li>• The next NP could be designated in an area that is already apart of Scottish national identity, or used to incorporate areas that are less celebrated</li> <li>• Promote a culture where active travel and interaction with nature is part of daily routine</li> </ul>
Participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Base local and national decision-making processes on lived experiences, recognising individual knowledge as expertise</li> <li>• Improve the consultation process</li> <li>• Establish additional channels of communication to proactively engage the public with the NP designation plans and process, and the ambition to implement NP values in cities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organise frequent engagement activities where civilians are engaged and their knowledge is legitimised as expertise</li> <li>• Make consultations more succinct</li> <li>• Make the platform for consultation engagement easier to find and access</li> <li>• Increase transparency in government plans and policymaking for NPs and greenspaces, including budget information and allocation</li> <li>• The NPC organisation and the Scottish Government should collaborate to increase opportunities for public engagement and for public opinions to be heard</li> </ul>

Table 1: Recommendations for NPs and NPCs organised by theme

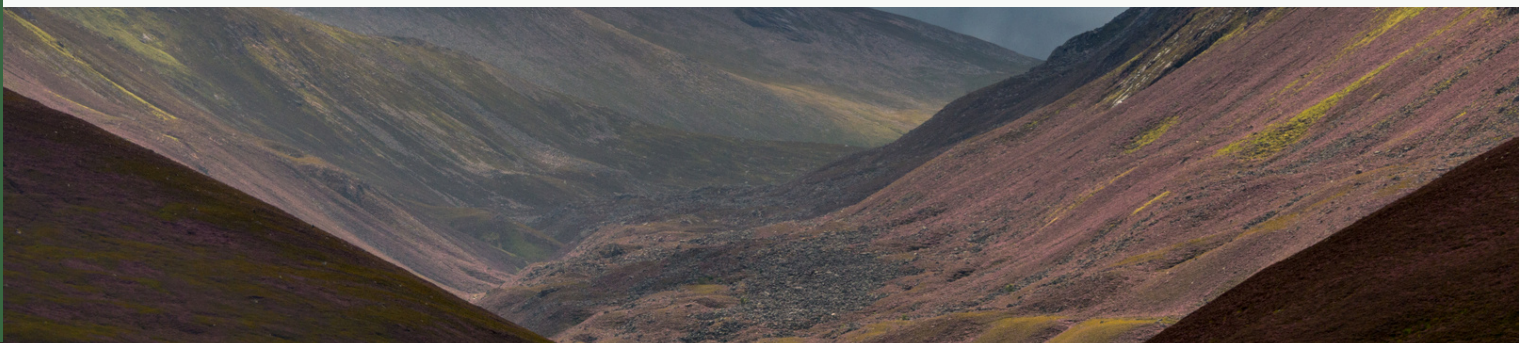
# Conclusion

NPs are essential to Scotland's vision for a sustainable future. Our research sought to fill a gap in the Scottish Government and the Glasgow National Park Cities Campaign knowledge of urban residents' perceptions of NPs and NPCs. We aimed to answer the following questions: (1) How do people use national parks/greenspaces? (2) How do people relate to greenspaces? (3) What are the barriers to accessing national parks? (4) To what extent do people feel like they have a voice? and (5) What would people like for the future of their NPs and NPCs?

We found urban residents use NPs and local greenspaces for leisure, recreation, improved wellbeing, socialising, and practical uses such as travelling through to reach other destinations. It is worth noting participants were unaware of the Scottish Government's plan to designate a new NP, and had not heard of the concept of a NPC before. Additionally, participants' relationships with NPs and greenspaces are characterised by perceptions of their inherent value due to their natural and cultural significances. With regards to accessibility, participants desire improved transport links within cities, as well as between cities and NPs, identifying inequalities in greenspace access due to wealth and car access. Insofar as inclusivity in decision-making processes, participants had a general lack of knowledge regarding how to participate in NP and NPC decision-making, as well as a lack of trust in the Government to deliver on consultations.

Our analysis brought out three key recommendations regarding the future of NPs and NPCs. First, enhancing transportation links within and beyond cities is necessary to improve the use and accessibility of NPs and greenspaces. Second, participants would like to see more public engagement in decision making surrounding NPs and NPCs, and for more transparent consultations. Third, participants would like the next NP to be an open greenspace providing opportunities to improve visitors' wellbeing and protect natural landscapes and cultural heritage.

Our research determined that urban residents perceive NPs and NPCs as important for the protection of nature, and are relevant to people's Scottish heritage. However, participants lacked awareness about which places are NPs, what NPCs are, and the fact that a new NP will be designated. This offers opportunities for the next NP to become a means of engaging people in the values of NPs and NPCs, beyond its physical designation. Furthermore, there is room to enhance people's physical access to NPs and greenspaces as well as access to decision-making processes on the designation of the NP and future sustainability visions for Scotland. NPs are not only pathways to increasing connections with nature, but also symbolic landscapes embedded in Scottish identities. There is demand in urban and rural spaces to improve access to these places; the new NP should not only be a label but an opportunity to facilitate participation and engagement in NPs in Scotland.



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# Appendix A: Maps

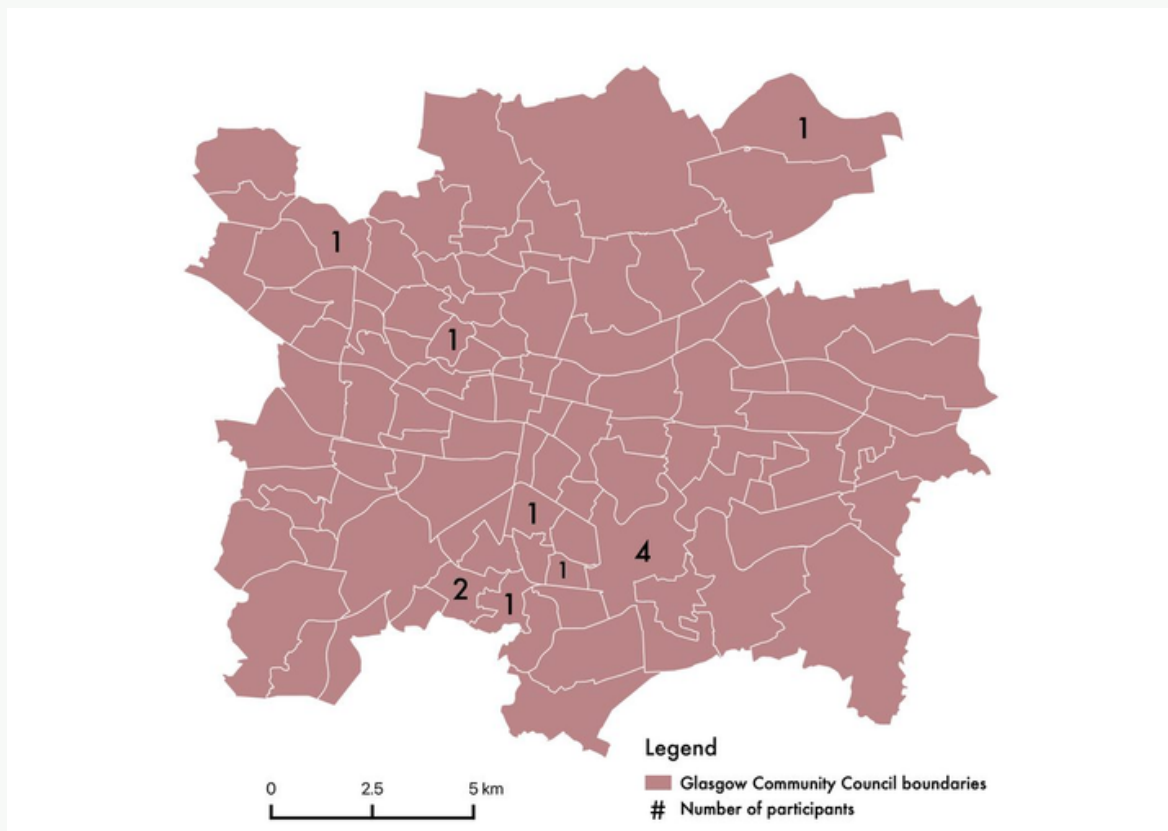


Figure A1: Distribution of Participants in Glasgow

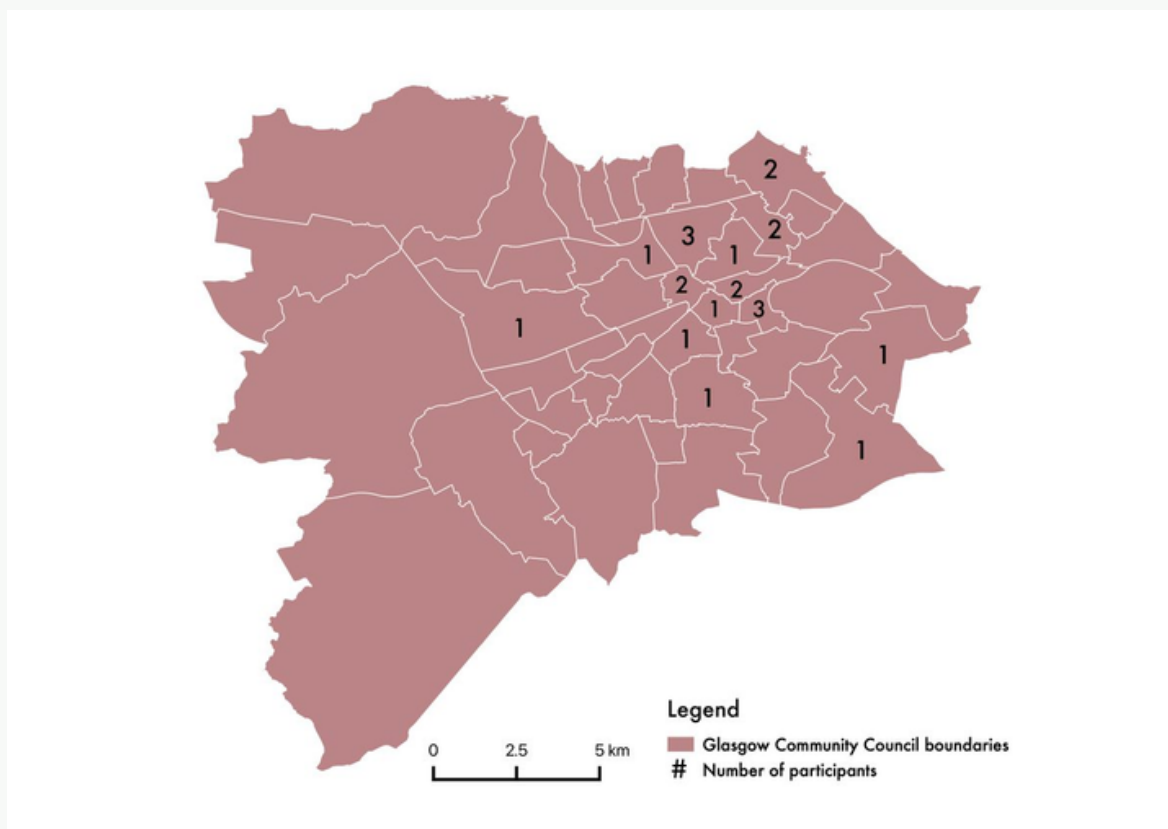


Figure A2: Distribution of Participants in Edinburgh

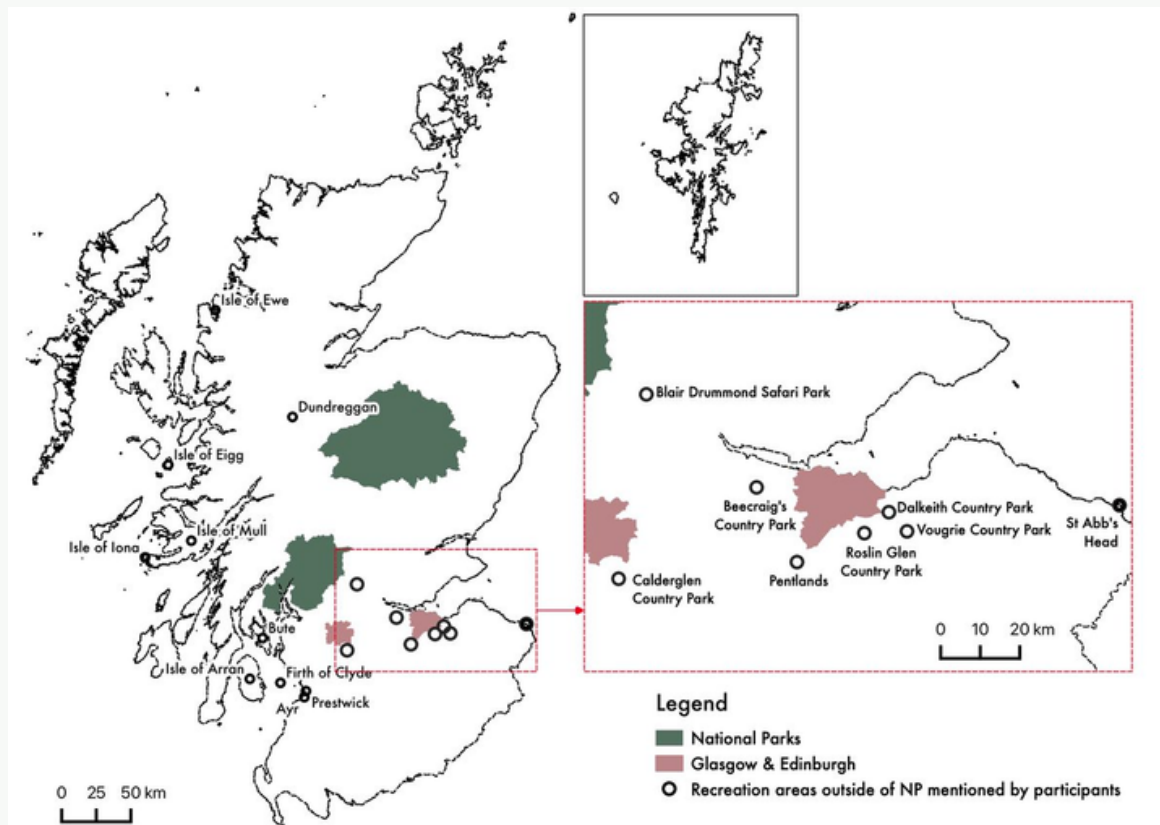


Figure A3: Map of Greenspaces Mentioned in Outside of NPs and Cities

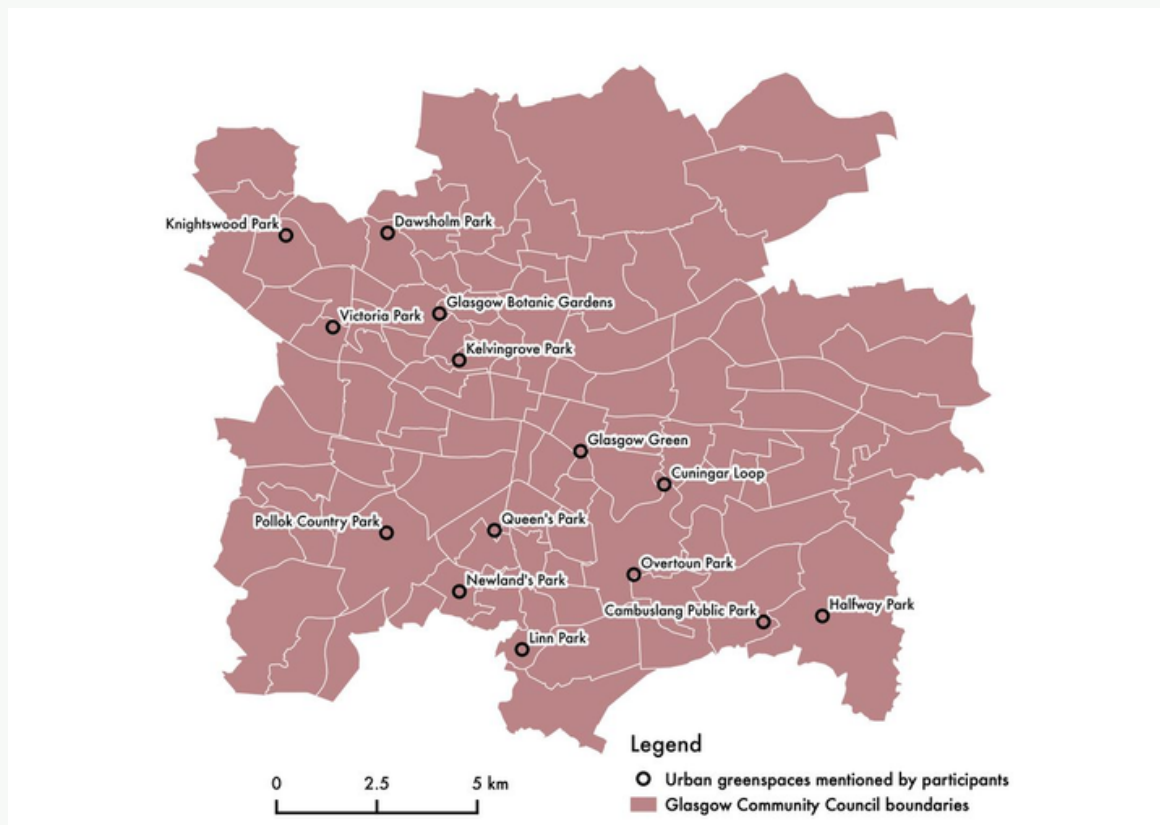


Figure A4: Map of Greenspaces Mentioned in Glasgow

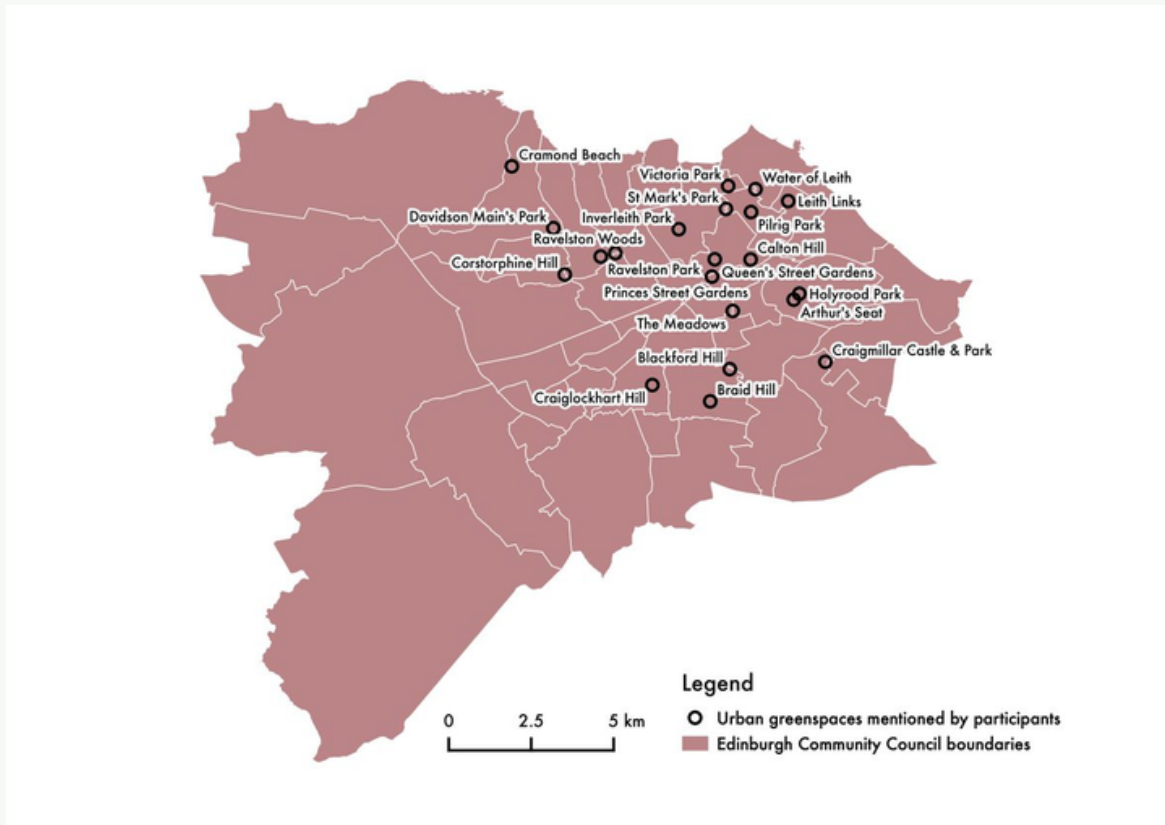


Figure A5: Map of Greenspaces Mentioned in Edinburgh

