Much of the recent growth in physical activity levels is coming from increases in **recreational walking**. From a health and well-being perspective, it would be useful if this inquiry therefore adopts a broader definition of sport which includes walking and forms of informal outdoor activity. It should also consider whether the recognised barriers to participation for these informal activities are easier to address than for formal sport.

The **natural environment and associated green infrastructure** such as paths, parks and other forms of greenspace can be an important enabler for encouraging active lifestyles and promoting behaviour change to improve people’s health and well-being. Walking and other forms of green exercise is usually free to the user, accessible and requires minimal specialist equipment. It lends itself to group activities which help build social connections and enhance community cohesion.

Scotland’s greenspace resources are a great asset for **physical activity for all ages**. Depending on where you live, these resources can take many forms, including playing fields, parks, woodlands and open areas and countryside within and on the edge of cities, towns and villages. Each provides a range of opportunities for a range of informal healthy outdoor activity as well some formal sports and active travel. Regular use of local greenspace can also help people obtain and maintain a level of physical fitness, the absence of which can be a barrier to engaging in sport. Being able to use local greenspace, either independently or within supportive programmes, can therefore be in itself a stepping stone to engagement in more formal sporting activities.

**A range of approaches are therefore needed to address barriers to participation.**

Under-representation in engagement in physical activity and formal sport is influenced by a range of issues including self-confidence, body image, feeling unfit or unwell, having limited access to facilities or clubs. A range of separate studies have also been carried out on barriers to the outdoors which could also be relevant to this review. Overall these studies suggest that some barriers will be more significant than others for certain user groups; people’s needs are different in different circumstances and they change according to life-stage. Some barriers will also be more significant in certain locations.

Research suggests that the quality of the outdoor environment is an important factor in encouraging daily exercise and urban greenspaces provide community resources that are inclusive and free to use.

- people in Scotland who have greenspace close to where they live are four times more likely to use it regularly (Scottish Government, 2014)
- people were 24% more likely to meet physical activity recommendations if they have access to greenspace (Coombes et al, 2010)
- while two thirds (68%) of people in Scotland have access to greenspace close to their homes, only half (49%) use their local space at least once a week, and a quarter (24%) never make any visits (Scottish Government, 2014)

Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) works with a range of stakeholders across Scotland to improve the provision and use of paths and greenspaces. We prioritise our support towards disadvantaged areas (in terms of Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD)) and groups: young people (under 25 years old), people on low incomes, people with poor physical or mental health, or people who are experiencing exclusion (such as a disability or through their ethnicity). A key aim of our work is to demonstrate how the natural environment and green
infrastructure can contribute to tackling physical inactivity and health inequalities. Three of our major areas of work which are relevant to this review are

- **Green Infrastructure Strategic Investment.** A European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) funded programme to increase and enhance green space in our towns and cities, especially close to areas of deprivation.

- **National Walking and Cycling Network.** A national development designated in the National Planning Framework 3 to establish a strategic network of 8000 km of well-maintained long-distance paths and trails that will enhance visitor and recreation experiences for all users, as well as supporting active travel and improving health and well-being for local communities.

- **Natural health service action programme.** Supported by both health and environment portfolios in Scottish Government, this programme seeks to up-scale and mainstream approaches to increasing physical activity and improving mental health through engagement with the natural environment.

**Key Messages**

- There is a **strong evidence base for the range of health benefits** of using local greenspace for physical exercise.
- The **outdoor environment is an under-utilised asset** for physical activity which can be used in many ways to improve health at individual, community and population levels.
- A **number of barriers** to using the outdoors for physical activity have been identified with strategies for addressing them developed for specific groups.
- Better **planning, design and management of places** to provide accessible, high quality greenspace, path networks and attractive landscapes close to where people live, work and learn can contribute to population-level health improvements.

SNH has published a Fact sheet on the Benefits of Green Infrastructure: [http://www.snh.gov.uk/docs/A1413427.pdf](http://www.snh.gov.uk/docs/A1413427.pdf)

**Scottish Natural Heritage**

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