

PROMOTING SAFETY in the Public Realm

What's needed to design, develop and build inclusive environments for all?

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What does it mean to **FEEL SAFE?**



FORWARD

Answers to this question will ultimately depend on the person being asked. And the range of possible responses to it only increases when framed around the public realm – that is, the spaces we all use and depend on each day.

We are now reaching a point where familiar ideas of ‘safety’ are being re-examined, not only as a matter of physical design but as a measure of how people feel and belong in the places they share with others.

It’s a highly complex issue that merits a deeper discussion and ongoing dialogue among those with the power to design and develop a built environment fit for all.

This is the rationale for a new working group led by Bradstone, a member of Holcim UK. Our collective task is to recognise that safety is not a single outcome, but an ongoing process – one shaped by the latest research insights, real-world successes and robust user data. This report is the first in a series documenting that process.

JO ROBERTS

HEAD OF PRODUCT MANAGEMENT AT HOLCIM UK



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RENEWING FOCUS on safety in the public realm



Safety has become a **DEFINING CHALLENGE** for the UK's public realm

It's a situation highlighted by several high-profile cases of gender-based violence in towns and cities across the country, alongside a growing body of research that points to structural failings and a pervasive sense of unease among those who regularly use these shared spaces.

In 2022, for instance, the Office for National Statistics found people feel significantly less safe after dark in streets, parks and on public transport when compared to the same settings during the day. This same group also reported changing their behaviour in response to perceived risks, especially women.¹

These findings form only a small part of a much broader, developing picture of what is meant by safety, as a wide-ranging emotional spectrum and its relationship to the built environment. Even with this work, however, safety still receives comparatively less attention than urban renewal, public health and decarbonisation, despite its strong connection to each of these issues.

This knowledge gap and a need for more joined-up thinking served as the inspiration for a new working group, chaired by Bradstone, a member of Holcim UK. In 2025, the business brought together landscape professionals, academics and industry leaders to develop a clearer understanding of best practice. Interdisciplinary in nature, the outcome of these roundtables has shown that safety is a complex,

moving picture, requiring thoughtful and sensitive action from those responsible for designing and managing public spaces.

Recognising this complexity, this report is the first in a series of planned initiatives that explore the challenges and opportunities for improving safety across the UK's built environment.

This report sets out the working group's vision, key discussion points and asks whether current initiatives adequately address the root cause of fear, exclusion and inequality in the public realm. The aim is to provide landscape architects, urban designers and planners, and those working in business improvement districts with dedicated guidance, based on the insights of the working group, serving as a reference for those in charge of delivery and ongoing management.

In short, we believe more can be done to promote safety in public spaces. And it's a process that requires closer collaboration between industry, academia and the public and private sectors.



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BEN GILL
ONE PLANET



IWONA KOSSEK
ASK FOR ANGELA



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Roundtable Attendees

Our Mission

Our mission is to bring peace of mind to public spaces and promote the use of active travel. Through a collaborative dialogue, we offer evidence-based guidance to landscape architects, urban designers and planners, as well as those working in business improvement districts across the public and private sectors. Through impactful pilot projects, we seek the creation of environments that encourage active travel, improve wellbeing and promote sustainable lifestyles.



Our Vision

We seek a future with a shared language for how to address safety in the public realm. By fostering positive feedback loops, where increased use brings more natural surveillance and a stronger sense of collective ownership, we can take a central role in the creation of places that feel safer over time.

This, in turn, supports healthier communities, resilient local economies and more sustainable cities.

Why NOW?

Recent announcements, such as the government's Safer Streets mission and the Angiolini Inquiry, have placed greater emphasis on risk and women's safety in public spaces.² These are welcome interventions, and we believe more can be done to create communities that are safe, inclusive and sustainable 'from the ground up', often beginning with the way these spaces are designed, developed and managed.

It's an issue of growing importance, not least because most of the population now lives in an urban or semi-urban environment.³ Minimising risk and promoting a sense of belonging through good practice will ultimately lead to better outcomes, such as greater engagement in active travel.

². <https://www.gov.uk/missions/safer-streets>
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/692ee226a245b0985f0343ed/E03342246_Angiolini_Inquiry_Pt2_Accessible.pdf

³. <https://statbase.org/data/gbr-urban-population-proportion>



What does it mean to **FEEL 'SAFE'** in the public realm?



Recent work on inclusion and women's safety in public spaces has shown perceptions are often deeply shaped by gender, power and the way cities are designed and managed, rather than by individual behaviour alone.⁴

Put simply, it's a more complicated picture than the term suggests.

In this context, the need for a clear, shared language was one of the first points raised at the opening roundtable – particularly what is actually meant by 'safety in the public realm' today.

DEFINITION

Broadly speaking, safety in the public realm refers to the collective protection and wellbeing of people using shared spaces, such as streets, squares, parks, transport and town centres.

This idea is not limited to 'actual' risk – i.e. crime, violence and accidents – but also perceived threats that prevent people from using public infrastructure and participating freely in public life.⁵ Depending on the individual, safety can mean:

- Freedom from violence or harassment
- Confidence navigating a space
- Ability to use a space without inconvenience or anxiety
- Inclusivity and sense of belonging

The working group agreed there are two core groups of measures to consider when making effective interventions:

PHYSICAL

i.e. placemaking and placekeeping, design, maintenance, lighting, sightlines, traffic control, surveillance etc.

SOCIAL

i.e. presence of others, community cohesion activity, space management and policing.

ACTUAL & PERCEIVED SAFETY

The working group was also keen to acknowledge the distinction between actual and perceived ideas of safety in public spaces.

ACTUAL SAFETY

Actual safety refers to an objective level of risk, supported by data sets including accident rates and crime statistics for a given area. However, many forms of sexual harassment and sexual violence are significantly underreported, meaning recorded incidents are likely to underestimate the true level of harm, particularly for women and girls.⁶ Actual safety considers the efficacy of systems, procedures and physical protections for reducing the likelihood of harm, irrespective of how safe people feel.

PERCEIVED SAFETY

is a subjective determination of risk shaped by emotions, past experiences and social contexts. It's also informed by previous traumatic experiences as well as visual cues – i.e. wooded or enclosed spaces, poor lighting or a lack of presence of certain groups of people.

4. <https://publica.co.uk/projects-gender-inclusion-and-womens-safety>

5. <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/363451579616767708/pdf/Handbook-for-Gender-Inclusive-Urban-Planning-and-Design.pdf>

6. <https://www.who.int/news/item/09-03-2021-devastatingly-pervasive-1-in-3-women-globally-experience-violence>

What this MEANS

Both categories – often referred to as ‘safety work’ – are important and must be considered. If actual safety is high but perceived safety is low, people may avoid spaces because of stress or mistrust. Someone walking through a wooded area of an urban green space, for instance, may feel unsafe even if the area has a statistically lower crime rate when compared to what appear to be safer areas of a town or city. On the other hand, if perceived safety is high but actual safety is low, people could be exposed to serious harm as they underestimate risk.

The key here is that perception can shape behaviour more significantly than reality. As such, any proposed intervention needs to consider an objective reduction of risk but also how people experience and interpret that risk in context. This will ensure that physical design, communication and engagement strategies properly align.

DIFFERENT PLACES, DIFFERENT NEEDS

Typology was raised as another lens through which to examine safety. Different kinds of public spaces generate different patterns of use, risks and perceptions depending on the time at which they're used, making a 'one size fits all' approach unlikely to succeed. Typology also influences basic parameters, such as lighting, sightlines and access control.

Recent guidance such as the Handbook for Creating Places that Work for Women highlights how a playbook of interventions needs to be adapted to different types of spaces, rather than applied uniformly.⁷

Awareness of these space and time distinctions ultimately allows for more precise changes to be made, without the risk of 'over-securitising'. In practice, this means certain settings require tailored approaches to deliver the best outcomes. Research on divided and post-conflict cities has shown how Belfast adapted its public realm and urban design interventions to different neighbourhood contexts – balancing safety, perception, and use in areas with very different histories, tensions and patterns of interaction.⁸



CASE STUDY SAFER PARKS: IMPROVING ACCESS FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS

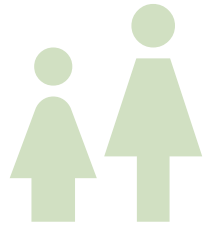


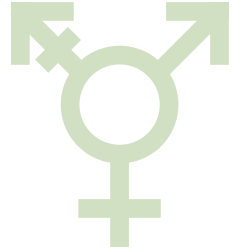


A recent example of a typology-specific approach can be seen within Safer Parks: Improving Access for Women and Girls, guidance developed to address the barriers women and girls face when using these spaces. This guidance was produced by a consortium of organisations, including the University of Leeds, West Yorkshire Combined Authority, Keep Britain Tidy, Make Space for Girls and Police Crime Prevention Initiatives.

Drawing on research from lived experiences, it sets out principles, case studies and practical interventions showing how changes to park design, management and maintenance – from sightlines and lighting to activity, staffing and communication – can make these spaces feel safer and more welcoming at different times of day and year.

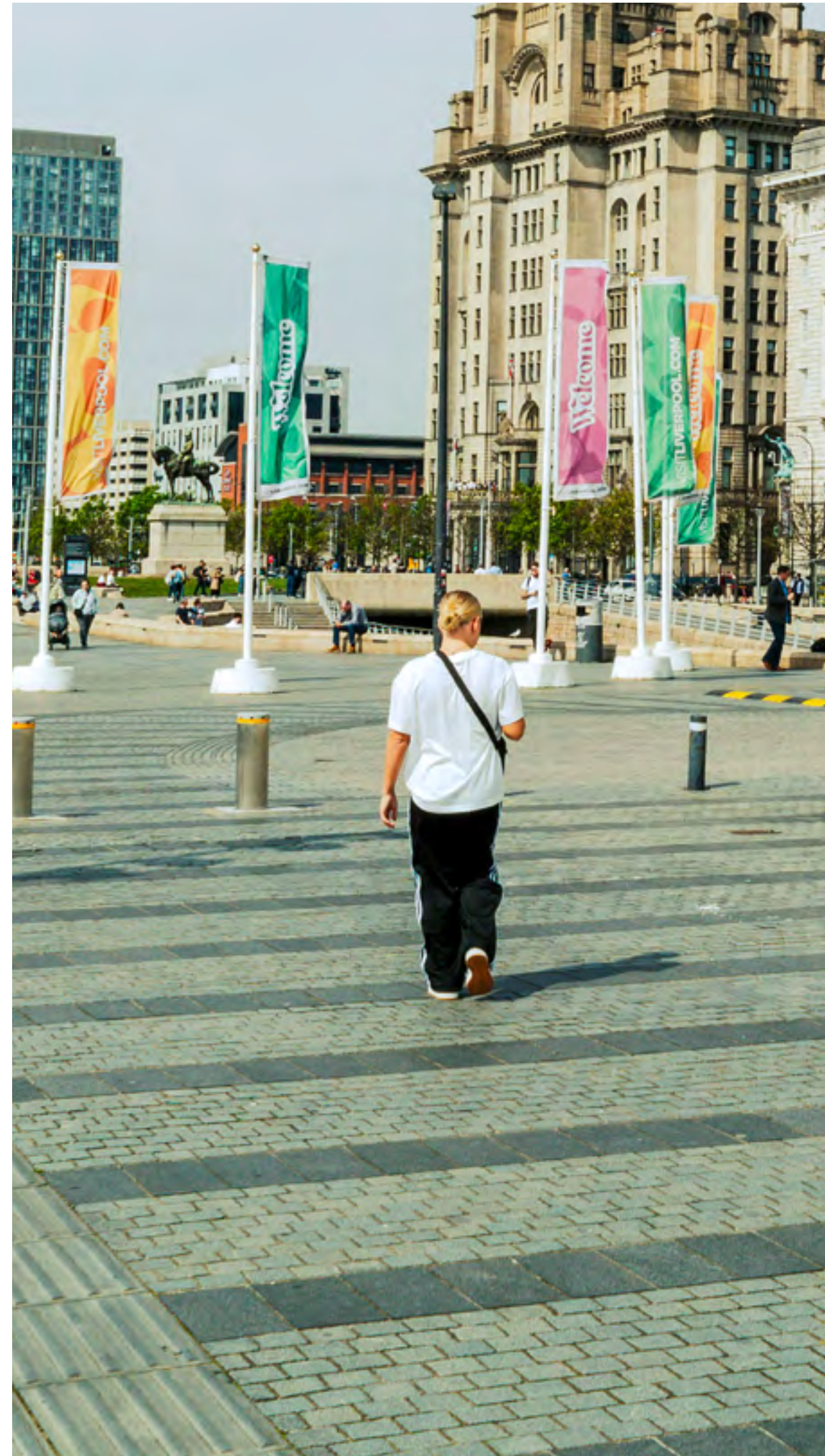
Taken together, this work shows how typology-sensitive, evidence-led interventions can improve safety outcomes in a way that responds to the risks and patterns of use associated with parks, rather than relying on generic measures.

COHORTS

Attendees noted the range of vulnerable groups, as well as the potential for those typically considered less vulnerable to feel unsafe in certain circumstances. At-risk groups noted included but were not limited to the following cohorts.

 <p>Women & Girls</p> <p>Violence, Harassment, Intimidation</p>	 <p>Elderly People</p> <p>Mobility issues, cognitive decline, busy and chaotic spaces</p>	 <p>Students</p> <p>Unfamiliarity with public spaces</p>
 <p>LGBTQ+ Individuals</p> <p>Fear of harassment or judgement</p>	 <p>Ethnic Minorities</p> <p>Cultural or language barriers affecting sense of belonging</p>	 <p>Neurodivergence</p> <p>Sensory overload, difficulty processing complex or unpredictable environments</p>

Why data is CRITICAL



As this section has shown, there are a range of ways in which to consider safety. This makes it difficult to reach an objective position on the best course of action without robust data in support.

Data moves best practice in public-realm safety away from intuition and towards evidence-based strategies – the type known to deliver the best outcomes long term.⁹ Data sets also help practitioners understand where harm and fear are concentrated, which interventions are effective and how conditions evolve through time, lowering the risk of changes that could cause harm or misdirection for certain groups.

The working group also emphasised the role data plays in targeted design. Tools can be used to score factors such as lighting, visibility, activity and maintenance, allowing qualitative impressions in different locations to be compared like-for-like. However, data alone is not enough: meaningful engagement with the groups most affected is essential to capture lived experience and ensure interventions reflect real-world needs. Safety walks and other participatory methods provide critical insight into how

people actually experience space at different times and in different contexts. For example, Parks for London's Environmental Visual Evaluation (EVE) tool supports structured, collaborative evaluations with women and girls to identify safety concerns and guide improvements in parks and green spaces.¹⁰

Building on this approach, work is now underway by researchers at the University of Leeds to develop a Safer Parks Dashboard, which brings together spatial and safety data to help police, local authorities and urban design professionals identify priorities for intervention in parks and green spaces.¹¹ Equipped with this type of insight, designers and planners can then develop tailored responses that address perceived disadvantages to safety in different areas 'on their own terms'.

Baseline measurements were also considered key for determining the efficacy of change, allowing teams to understand if their suggestions are genuinely improving an environment or simply displacing problems. This is especially important for demonstrating the gap between public perception and actual incidents.

9. https://whatworksgrowth.org/wp-content/uploads/Evidence-based_policy_in_disadvantaged_places.pdf

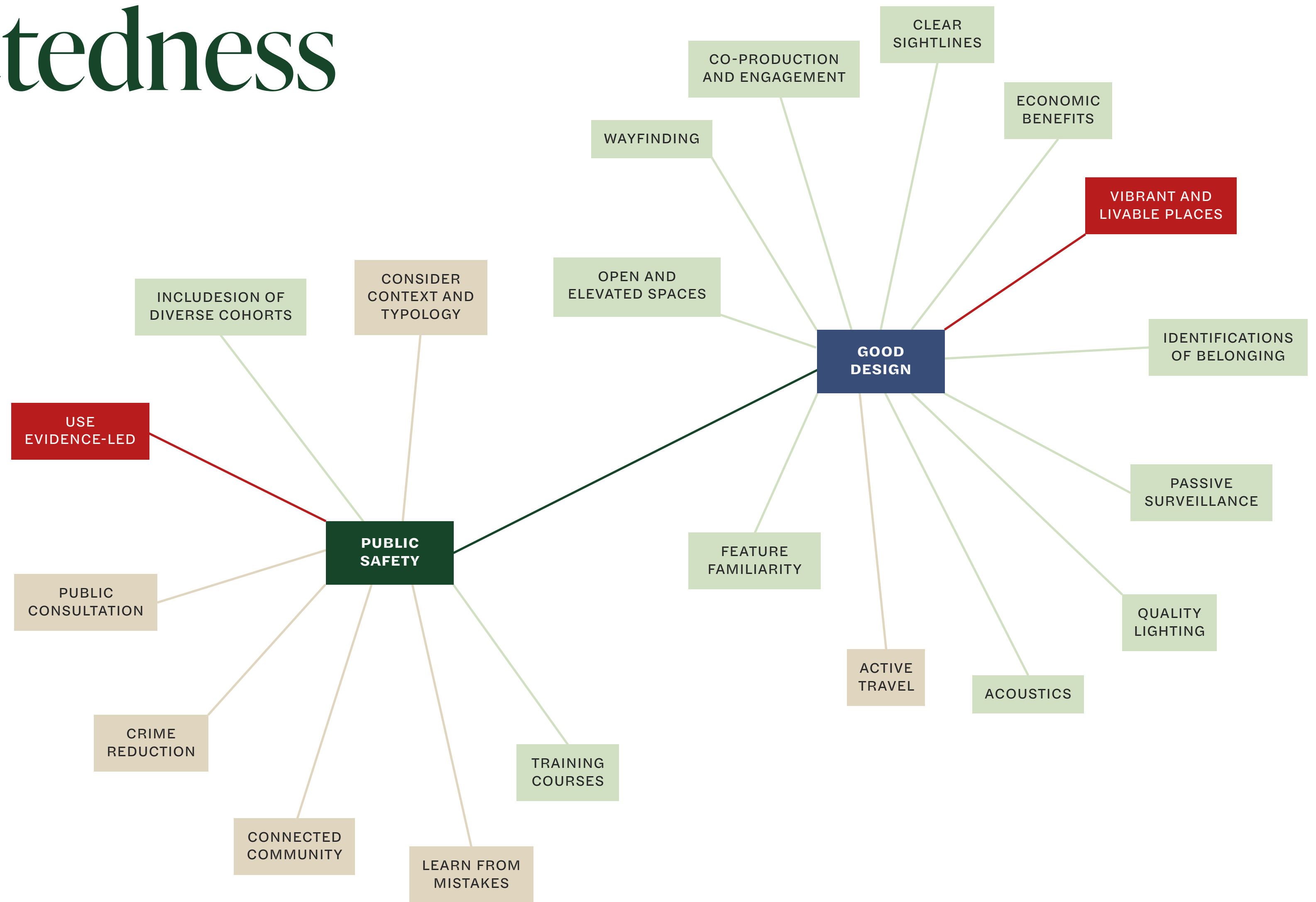
10. <https://futureofparks.leeds.ac.uk/safer-parks>

11. <https://arc.leeds.ac.uk/knowledge-centre/case-studies/safer-parks>

The interconnectedness of public safety

OnePlanet's mind map shows how public safety is shaped by a web of connected factors, from environmental design and community wellbeing to transport, lighting, policing and accessibility.

The map presents safety not as a single problem, but rather as part of a broader system influenced by different competing pressures. Its strength lies in making those connections clear. By setting out the topic in linked branches, the mind map helps identify where responsibilities overlap, where actions reinforce one another and where gaps may exist between policies or service providers.



WHY safety suffers



Public-realm safety is not a new concept, with a range of initiatives and schemes launched in recent years. Perhaps the most visible examples of work in this area can be seen through initiatives and schemes, such as Ask for Angela, Living Streets and Green Flag Award, as well as research from the University of Leeds and industry bodies like the Landscape Institute.

However, the working group made clear despite this work there are still several barriers impeding progress – and these need better visibility for interventions to be truly effective. This section discusses those barriers.

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VOLUME OF INFORMATION

Safety often features lower on the agenda when compared with other issues in the built environment, leading to a growing body of guidance, advice and best practice that lacks structure, consistency and clarity for those who would benefit most from using it

LACK OF STRATEGIC THINKING

Lack of strategic thinking – For many people, especially vulnerable groups, everyday barriers

can quietly but powerfully limit when and how they choose to move through public spaces. These barriers are not only physical – they can be cognitive, social and emotional, and will often intersect in ways that standard guidance fails to capture. Recent work from the University of Leeds has conceptualised six distinct barriers to accessibility, underlining the need to address these overlapping constraints in a more systematic way.¹²

Procedure

Misunderstandings



SAFETY IS AN ABSENCE OF CRIME

It's reasonable to assume that safety is almost entirely down to a reduction of violent and antisocial behaviour, though as the previous section showed, this line of thinking fails to account for other conditions that give rise to fear in public spaces.

SAFEGUARDING IS SOMEONE ELSE'S JOB

It's often assumed safety in public spaces is the responsibility of a specific agency, rather than a shared duty across businesses, services and community members.

MORE POLICING AND CCTV ARE THE MOST EFFECTIVE INTERVENTIONS

Over-policing and poorly regulated surveillance can undermine trust and make some groups feel less safe. There is also a human rights dimension to consider with use of these technologies – i.e. what is an acceptable use and what is too invasive or potentially illegal.

JUST ADD MORE LIGHTING

Well-lit areas and thoroughfares are an important aspect of improving both actual and perceived safety in public spaces. However, it's only one in several tools at designers' disposal and should be used carefully. In some instances, harsh lighting can have the opposite effect by casting long shadows and making it hard to navigate spaces in the evening. It can also negatively impact biodiversity and local wildlife. This underscores the importance of holistic management of public spaces, featuring management plans that cover all hours of the day, including after dark.

Design & Management Mistakes

Historically, many urban spaces have been planned around a linear, single-earner model, in which one member of a household travelled to and from work while others' movements were largely invisible in design decisions.

We now need to plan for multi-purpose, dynamic spaces, where several people from the same household may be commuting, as well as combining trips such as school drop-offs, shopping and care responsibilities within the same journey.

Design and management need to be considered in tandem: poor physical design cannot be fully compensated for by management alone, and good management cannot fix fundamentally unsafe layouts.

Against this backdrop, several recurring physical design mistakes were highlighted.

PHYSICAL DESIGN MISTAKES



Dense planting, hidden recesses and unmanaged alleys create ambush spots.



Mixing vehicles, cyclists and pedestrians without clear separation, crossings and speed control increases the chances of collision and intimidation.



Long, enclosed routes with poor lighting, blind corners or high walls that remove natural surveillance and escape routes – i.e. Secured by Design.

Poor practice

SPACE MANAGEMENT MISTAKES



Lack of maintenance and upkeep signals antisocial behaviour is tolerated – i.e. ‘broken windows theory’.



Over-reliance on hostile architecture, such as spikes and defensive benches, that displaces people and limits legitimate use.



Ignoring diverse users’ needs – i.e. designing around a ‘default’ user that fails to acknowledge the challenges encountered by vulnerable groups

WEAK GOVERNANCE



Treating safety as solely the responsibility of the police, rather than as a shared responsibility requiring partnership working across councils, land managers, community groups, active travel organisations, health services, and local residents.



Lack of nuanced management plan that covers all hours of the day. ‘After dark’ is not the same as ‘nighttime’: it can be dark from 3:30 pm in winter, which is still part of the daytime for many users.

RESEARCH BY THE OFFICE FOR NATIONAL STATISTICS

SOURCE

13. **Perceptions of Personal Safety & Experiences Of Harassment**
Great Britain,
Office for National Statistics

People feel less safe walking alone in all settings after dark than during the day, with women feeling less safe than men

Disabled people feel less safe in all settings than non-disabled people

Three-fifths of people feel unsafe in a park or open space after dark

24% of men and 37% of women stop walking in quiet places such as parks or open spaces after dark due to safety concerns

RESEARCH FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS AND THE WEST YORKSHIRE COMBINED AUTHORITY

SOURCE

14. **What Makes A Park Feel Safe Or Unsafe?**
The views of women, girls and professionals in West Yorkshire

Busier parks feel safer because more people provide passive surveillance and help if needed.

The presence of other women is seen as a positive sign that a park is safe and welcoming.

Organised group activities make parks feel safer and can extend women’s use of them.

Seeing people with a similar identity can feel reassuring, although diversity in users also matters.

Women often feel unable to challenge harassment in parks and cannot rely on bystander intervention, which contributes to feeling unsafe.

Safety apps may help but many women dislike the burden of having to use them, as well the loss of autonomy.

Fences and walls around park edges are generally seen as making parks feel less safe by reducing visibility and escape routes.

It’s usually considered safer to ignore unwanted comments than to challenge them directly.

What's at stake



The benefits of a well-managed and coherently designed public realm are apparent. At a foundational level, safer spaces promote physical and psychological wellbeing. They also address health inequalities by making everyday movement, access to green space and participation in public life feasible for more people.

That interconnectedness alone is important enough to appraise the state of current policies and design principles. However, as the working group noted, there are a range of other secondary benefits for those adopting best practice.

At a foundational level, safer spaces promote physical and psychological wellbeing.

Secondary benefits for adopting best practice



HIGHER RATES OF ACTIVE TRAVEL

The link between safer public spaces and different forms of active travel is well-established. Perceived safety is known to have a measurable effect on whether people choose to walk or cycle.¹⁵

This in turn lowers the environmental impact of an urban community, lowering emissions from road traffic.



CRIME REDUCTION

Research suggests 'cleaning and greening' initiatives can yield significant improvements in local crime rates.¹⁶ However, there are also cultural considerations to consider.

Design preferences are not universal, and spaces that reflect one group's tastes may feel less welcoming to others.

Bridget Snaith's work, for example, shows that ethnic preferences for landscape style can shape how parks are perceived and used, with important implications for inclusion and equity.¹⁷



COMMUNITY INTEGRATION & INCLUSIVITY

Well-designed and managed public spaces build social cohesion by drawing diverse groups for interaction, combating urban loneliness. Features like natural surveillance and clear sightlines create welcoming environments that increase dwell time and community trust. This leads to stronger neighbourhood ties and inclusive spaces for all users.



ECONOMIC GAINS

Safe spaces, both actual and perceived, encourage higher footfall, stimulating local businesses, job creation and urban economies during the day and at night.¹⁸

These environments may also attract higher levels of tourism. This is reflected in initiatives such as Purple Flag, which recognises and promotes vibrant, safe and well-managed evening and night-time economies.



VIBRANCY & LIVEABILITY

Good design and management of the public realm promote pride in place, in turn securing a range of associated benefits, including stronger community cohesion, higher local economic activity, improved mental wellbeing and greater willingness among residents and visitors to use, care and invest in their local area.

15. https://www.ictct.net/wp-content/uploads/23-Hague-2010/ictct_document_nr_755.pdf

16. <https://www.forestresearch.gov.uk/tools-and-resources/fthr/urban-regeneration-and-greenspace-partnership/practical-considerations-and-challenges-to-greenspace/crime-and-vandalism-challenges-and-practical-considerations/>

17. <https://www.bbbc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/PhD-Summary-small.pdf>

18. <https://thelandtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Future-proofing-the-public-realm-FINAL.pdf>

Effective interventions



There is already a range of insight and best practice for landscape architects, urban designers and planners to use when developing proposals for regeneration projects.

The working group's findings emphasise the need for collaborative and cross-disciplinary approaches to safety, backed by freely available, robust data sets. Still, it became clear there is already a range of insight and best practice for landscape architects, urban designers and planners to use when developing proposals for regeneration projects.

Good design principles



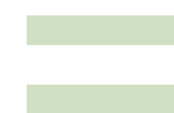
CLEAR SIGHTLINES

Allow people to spot hazards early and observe surroundings, while also minimising hiding spots for antisocial behaviour. Raised canopies that still maintain vegetation and clear entry and exit points form part of this process.



MAXIMISING PASSIVE SURVEILLANCE

The concept of 'eyes on the street' has been used for some time, allowing for natural oversight provided by residents and pedestrians. This can be achieved by prioritising clear sightlines and intelligent use of lighting and interventions to activate spaces.



FEATURE FAMILIARITY

Maintaining a visual identity in keeping with a local area can alleviate fears of the unknown.



OPEN AND ELEVATED SPACES

Eliminating narrow pinch points and unnecessary street clutter helps create a sense of openness, confidence and accessibility. This also speaks to one of the key tenets of biophilia: prospect and refuge, where people feel more secure when they can see ahead while still having access to places of shelter or pause.



LIGHTING

Research suggests that improved street lighting can reduce crime, particularly where existing lighting is poor and the change is substantial.¹⁹ However, lighting should still be designed strategically for the space it's in, because over-lighting or poorly targeted illumination may be less effective and can create unnecessary visual clutter.²⁰

Good design principles



WAYFINDING

Clear signage, maps and other cues guide people along safe routes, especially when entering an unfamiliar area for the first time. Best practice should also meet the needs of the visually impaired, wheelchair users and neurodivergent users, ensuring that navigation is intuitive, legible and accessible. The working group acknowledged the heightened importance of wayfinding in university towns.



ACOUSTICS

Sonics are an important factor for the way people experience public spaces. Loud environments can prompt anxiety for some users, although some sounds can potentially mask antisocial behaviour. Designers should consider 'overlay' sounds – such as flowing water – in cases where vegetation cover does little to mask intrusive noise. Citizen science tools like the Hush City app complement this by enabling people to map and evaluate everyday quiet areas, helping planners and designers identify, protect, and enhance acoustically pleasant spaces for health and wellbeing.



CO-PRODUCTION AND ENGAGEMENT

The most effective design principles are grounded in the lived experience of potential users. Early and ongoing engagement with communities, especially groups who may feel excluded or unsafe, helps ensure interventions reflect real needs rather than assumptions.



INDICATIONS OF BELONGING

Design can signal that a place is intended for diverse users, not just passers-by or dominant groups. Inclusive planting, seating, public art, lighting warmth, accessible facilities and cues of care can help people feel they belong.

The working group also identified several other interventions to complement recommended design features

PLACE-SPECIFIC AUDITING

Auditing with a diverse range of potential users can help identify barriers that may otherwise be missed, particularly in historic spaces that were not always designed with safety in mind. This builds on a long tradition of women's safety audits and safety walks, with newer tools emerging to support this kind of inclusive, on-site assessment.²¹

USE OF CITIZENS' ASSEMBLIES

Citizens' assemblies capture concerns and reservations are noted during consultation and are representative of those who will use the public space.²² Others have also explored 'co-clienting', where community members or end-users take on formal decision-making roles alongside public authorities or developers, creating greater ownership and accountability from the outset.

ACTIVE BYSTANDER TRAINING

Allows people to recognise and interrupt potentially harmful behaviour, bolstering the concept of passive surveillance

ACKNOWLEDGING SAFETY SUCCESSES

Ensuring learnings are acknowledged, documented and celebrated widely, allowing for easier transferral of best practice and public engagement with safety initiatives. Following Safer Parks guidance, the Green Flag Award introduced a new Best Initiative to Engage and Increase the Use of Parks by Women and Girls category as part of its 'Best of the Best' awards, recognising and sharing exemplary projects that improve access and safety for women and girls.

Carrying forward the interventions that matter



CONCLUSION

Safety in the public realm demands more than technical fixes – it's about restoring trust, belonging and freedom of movement for everyone who shares our streets, parks and squares.

We've moved beyond seeing safety as merely the absence of crime, recognising instead how design, management and societal attitudes intertwine to either welcome people in or quietly push them away.

This report is not the end of the conversation, but rather a new reference point from which to proceed. We have the tools to unlock benefits that ripple outward: healthier communities through active travel, stronger economies via night-time vibrancy and deeper social cohesion.

Now it's a matter of applying the principles of good design, backed by the latest and most robust research.

BRADSTONE®

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IN THE PUBLIC REALM**