

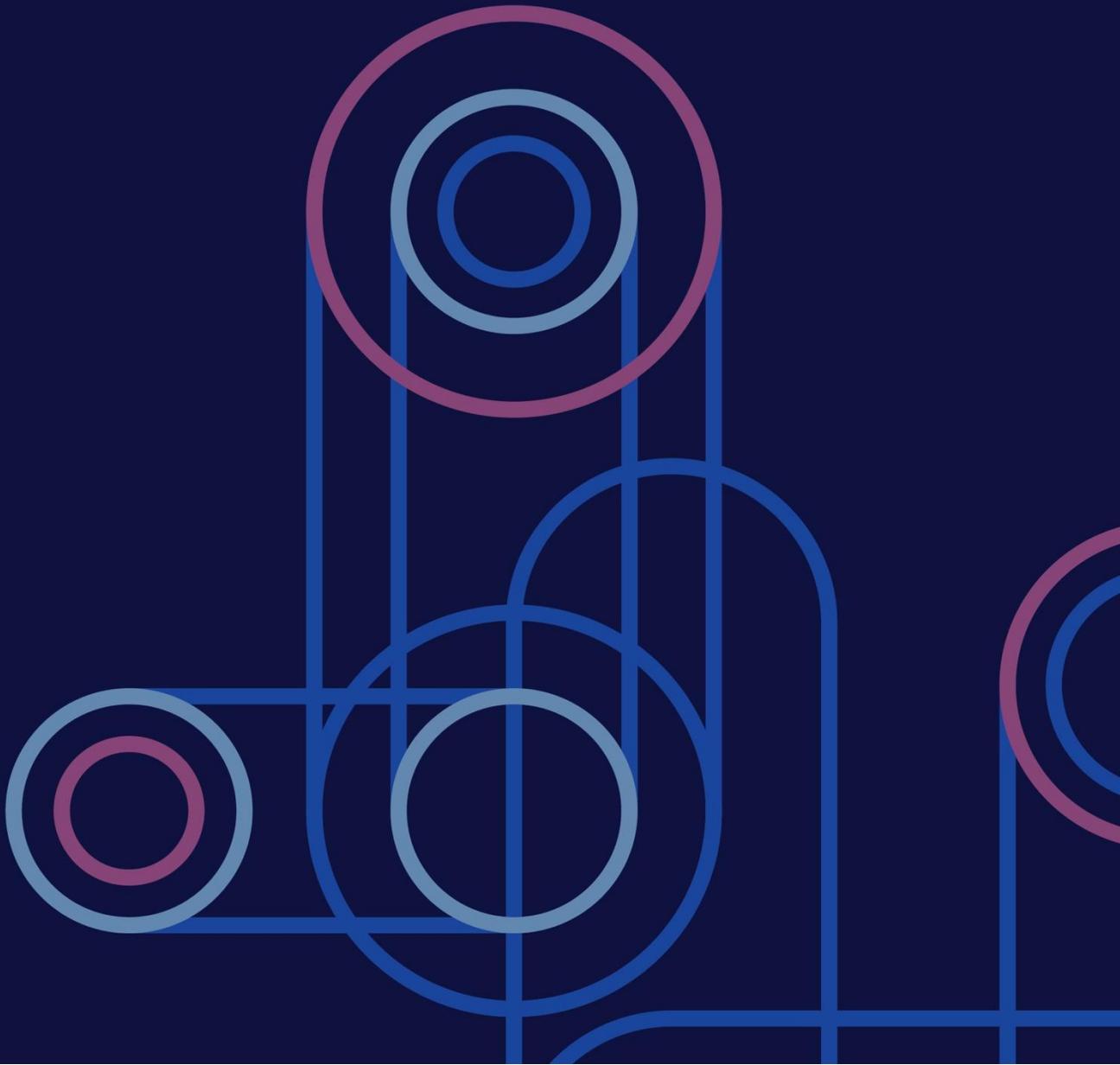


World Health
Organization

CASE STUDY

*Compassionate Places: Place Quality Model for
healthy, human-centric design, planning standards
and placemaking*

2025



Basic information

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| WHO Region | EURO |
| City or Country | London (Brent), United Kingdom |
| Timeline | 2022 – ongoing |
| Type of intervention | Policy; planning |
| Primary level of implementation | Neighbourhood (borough) |
| Primary sectors involved | Urban planning; housing; public space; health; architecture; urban design |
| Primary health outcomes or challenges | Health equity; physical and mental health; social connection and belonging; inclusivity; quality of life; well-being; housing; open space |

Case description

The Compassionate Places Method / Place Quality Model is a transdisciplinary approach and practical framework that integrates built environment design practice, public health and human sciences, drawing on insights from neuroscience, environmental psychology, sociology, and spatial justice to reorient how urban environments are shaped. Developed by a private consultancy (“Matter Space Soul”), the model has been adapted for local government, providing a structured way to embed human health, social wellbeing, inclusivity and equity considerations into everyday planning and design decisions.

Brent, one of London’s most diverse and densely populated boroughs, has faced persistent inequalities in health and wellbeing. Rapid population growth, coupled with the challenges of dense urban living and insights from the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, underscored the need to improve the quality of urban environments. In 2022, responding to this imperative, Brent Council pursued a novel strategy for developing spatial planning guidance on residential amenity space. Through the nation-wide “Public Practice” programme, it embedded the author of the Place Quality Model within the spatial planning team to co-develop guidance responsive to local health and social challenges. These included high population density and – in certain areas – deficiencies in open space and intersecting patterns of deprivation and health inequality.

This process led to the creation of Brent’s Residential Amenity Space & Place Quality Supplementary Planning Document (SPD). This guidance was adopted in June 2023, and

requires residential developments to demonstrate how their designs will support people's quality of life. A key innovation is the SPD's emphasis on the quality of the places and spaces created and not merely numerical targets. By design, this reflects the three interlinked dimensions of the Place Quality Model: health and wellbeing, community and belonging, and creating vibrant, inclusive places. The model considers these connected outcomes across the scale of individuals, social relationships and wider civic life. This framing is operationalised through qualitative indicators and design principles that describe the experiential qualities of spaces, supplementing quantitative metrics. Developments are expected to show how different types of shared spaces, from public space to internal common spaces, will benefit people's quality of life. This includes describing how they will be comfortable, active, restorative, sociable, inclusive and distinctive, and how they will support social integration across age and cultural groups in a highly diverse borough.

Implementation in Brent occurs primarily through the planning process, through new outcomes-based standards and benchmarks for design quality. These are expected to be used early in the design development process, as part of ongoing discussions between design teams, developers and officers. The tools set out spatial qualities to be considered from the first principles of design, such as the overall strategy and spatial organisation of a masterplan, and the relationship to the surrounding context and communities. The SPD requires an Amenity Space Quality Statement to be submitted for relevant schemes, supported by step-by-step Place Quality tools for each dimension, indicators of spatial design quality, and a template that, together, guide designers and decision-makers in applying methods ranging from socio-economic and cultural context analysis to more detailed qualitative assessment. Planning officers, applicants and independent Quality and Community Review Panels use the framework to assess proposals, while considering co-benefits such as green infrastructure and sustainability.

A key achievement has been embedding this innovation in a typically risk-averse public sector context without disrupting existing workflows. Development of the intervention was iterative and responsive, with successive workshops involving officers, politicians and design review panellists to ensure that the guidance matched real operational needs and everyday processes. Progress was gauged through stakeholder and public



Image credit: Natasha Reid, MATTER SPACE SOUL

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Place Quality Framework pictured with a site visit including Brent Council officers, Matter Space Soul and PHIRST Insight public health academic evaluation team.

London, UK: 2024. © Natasha Reid

buy-in and feedback during consultation, culminating in the successful adoption of the SPD as formal planning guidance. The Place Quality Model is now an established part of the planning process in a borough of approximately 340 000 residents; major developments (10 dwellings and above) are expected to respond to its requirements.

The intervention was selected for an academic evaluation by the Public Health Intervention Responsive Studies Teams (PHIRST), funded by the National Institute for Health and Care Research. This evaluation assessed how well this new approach was being integrated into the planning process, such as how design teams apply the framework in practice and how the intervention influences awareness, perceptions, behaviours and practices around healthy placemaking among designers, officers and decision-makers.

Overall, the PHIRST evaluation found that the Place Quality Intervention has been well received and there are positive indicators of early take up. Additionally, professionals in the planning process believed the SPD could serve as a valuable tool for enhancing the overall quality of planning by promoting ongoing reflection and learning from developments and how they impact the community, both during and after construction. Findings could inform potential adaptation to other local authorities and uses, or scaling

to city-wide and national policy. Insights include the importance of the Quality Statement requirement and template introduced in January 2025, and flexibility in applying the new standards to strike a balance with economic viability.

Key enablers for implementation included a forward-looking organisational culture within Brent Council, trusted interpersonal relationships among team members, and structured support from the Public Practice scheme to facilitate the incorporation of an external practitioner into local government. The core practice approach resonates with broader movements around systems change and transformative innovation, emphasizing transdisciplinary mindsets, experimentation and the reconfiguration of system components to achieve objectives.

Challenges have included the need to develop a common, non-technical language for a wide range of stakeholders and to maintain simplicity in a tool that addresses complex human needs. Long-term health and equity impacts will depend on how consistently and ambitiously the framework is applied across developments and over time, a question that the PHIRST evaluation has recommended for further short and long-term study.

Strategic Highlight

The Place Quality Model applied in Brent shows how insights from multiple disciplines can be organised to shape everyday decisions about planning and development. It begins from the premise that residential environments are not only physical arrangements but settings for health, social relationships, inclusivity and local identity. By drawing together evidence from multiple disciplines, the model translates a broad body of knowledge into a practical framework that can be used in standard planning processes.

The model's three dimensions (health and wellbeing, community and belonging, vibrant and inclusive places) and three scales of analysis (individuals, social relationships, wider civic life) help designers and decision-makers develop a holistic vision, looking beyond minimum area standards or conventional checklists of physical features, and instead asking how a development will affect how residents feel, connect with others and participate in local life. The framework is applied through qualitative indicators and questions that guide officers, designers and review panels in assessing proposals in a consistent way.

Because the model is designed for local authorities, designers and decision-makers, it pays particular attention to the translation and presentation of transdisciplinary knowledge, such as insights from the fields of Neuroarchitecture and Biophilic Design. Complex concepts are re-expressed as clear expectations and examples that can be used by non-specialists. This enables planners, architects, urban designers, public health practitioners and community stakeholders to work together more effectively. It also

makes it easier to discuss trade-offs and co-benefits, for example when balancing density targets with access to restorative green space or opportunities for informal social contact.

The intervention in Brent demonstrates how such a framework can be embedded in statutory tools. Through the SPD, Place Quality considerations are now part of routine decision-making on development proposals. Structured tools, templates and training support officers and applicants in applying the model. An independent evaluation has examined how it influences awareness, behaviour and practice.

For other cities, this case suggests that applying transdisciplinary insights to decision-making requires more than citing evidence. It involves designing frameworks and processes that make complex knowledge usable, negotiating how they fit with existing powers and workflows, and creating productive feedback loops through monitoring and evaluation. The Brent experience also highlights the value of institutional positions and partnerships that connect practice, research and community perspectives, so that decisions about urban development reflect a broad understanding of what people need from the places where they live.

Further Information

- [Brent Council: Residential Amenity Space & Place Quality Supplementary Planning Document](#)
- [Compassionate Places: Place Quality Model for healthy, human-centric design and planning: Infographic](#)
- [Compassionate Places: Developing and Implementing a Method for Interdisciplinary, Humanistic Spatial Design and Place Quality Standards](#)
- [Place Quality Framework: Overview](#)
- [PHIRST: Evaluation: Residential Amenity Space and Place Quality SPD \(Supplementary Planning Document\)](#)
- [PHIRST: Residential Place Quality Intervention: Policy Briefing](#)
- [London council introduces framework to help set “Place Quality” benchmark](#)
- [Place Quality Framework: Homes England case study webinar \[video\]](#)