



RESEARCH PROPOSAL 2023 - 2028

Name of Academic Lead:	Professor Michelle Baybutt
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Indicate which research area this plan refers to:

Health and Wellbeing	X	Public Value Governance	
Place Development		Social Inclusion	

NB This proposal to be completed with reference to the WRL Business plan 2023-2028

Insert names and roles of other research team members:

Name	Role
Dr Ursula Pool	Research Lead

Q1. Define the research proposal for 2023-2028 for the above area with reference to:

- (i) the activities the team proposes to undertake;**
- (ii) the scope and, in general terms, methodology;**
- (iii) what is new and original and the capacity for invention, innovation and added value.**

We recognise that these plans will be more detailed for the early years than for the later years.

Maximising the Wellbeing Benefits of Local Nature in Underserved Communities

The previous research funded by Westlakes Research Ltd., focusing on Healthy Coastal Communities, led by Dr Ursula Pool, has laid the foundations for the current proposal by developing understanding of and insight into effective governance mechanisms for public health and wellbeing at the community level. The previous work also began to explore the potential for green and blue space to improve health and wellbeing and reduce health inequalities in coastal communities, particularly in the context of healthy ageing and the lifecycle. The current work plan draws on this background, including both the expertise that has been developed and the partnerships and contacts that have been formed during the first phase of the research.

The relationship between green and blue spaces and health has been the subject of increasing research interest in recent years, with a substantial body of evidence showing that contact with nature is associated with positive health and wellbeing outcomes. Local natural spaces are important for public health and can contribute to the wellbeing of both individuals and communities, promoting health equity. Green and blue spaces aid in reducing health inequalities and have been linked with numerous health benefits including reduced stress, enhanced cognitive function, and improved emotional well-being. They act as cost-effective solutions to enable healthier lives, potentially reducing



the burden on healthcare systems. The 'settings' approach is central in health promotion and recognises the influence of the environments where people live, work, and play on health. Coastal communities can be regarded as a specific type of setting in which local nature, and in particular local blue space, may be an under-used public health resource. Since coastal communities are often areas where health and wellbeing is below average, making best use of this potential as one way of reducing health inequalities should be a public health imperative, both in terms of policy and practice. However, how to harness the full health and wellbeing benefits of green and blue space is not fully understood. The proposed research will aim to address this important gap.

It is well known that physical accessibility is an important factor in determining whether people will interact with nature/green and blue space. However, although this type of accessibility is necessary, it may not be sufficient. A key insight from Pool et al.'s (2023) investigation of perceptions of local green and blue spaces among older adults was the importance of the psychological accessibility of these spaces. Therefore an initial focus of this programme of research will be increasing understanding of different types of accessibility to and engagement with blue space in coastal communities. This will lead to further work on how to improve accessibility and engagement and optimise exposure to both local green and blue space, taking a life-course perspective, and directed towards the context of practical recommendations for equitable policy and practice.

The research will deliver on the Westlakes Research Ltd. Business Plan in the following ways:

- **Policy and Practice:** Cumberland Council has pledged to put health and wellbeing at the heart of everything they do. The Council Plan also names four pillars that are essential underpinnings. One of these is the natural environment. The current programme of research will provide evidence to help inform local policy and practice. It will combine practical application in Cumberland with policy relevance in this context.
- **Portable and Scalable:** Although initially based in Cumberland, the work will be portable and scalable: the issues faced by underserved communities, despite all being rooted in specific places, share common features. This bigger picture will be a constant consideration in the work. Although the first part of the research plan focuses on Cumbria, in later years we expect to build on the work by expanding to other locations. There is also the possibility to scale the work to have wider relevance by incorporating non-coastal blue space, including rivers, stream, lakes and smaller bodies of water such as ponds. In addition, there is potential to expand the work to incorporate different green space settings and activities; we will make a judgment on this as the work progresses.
- **Funding:** We will seek and apply for external funding on an ongoing basis in order to expand and scale up the work and involve a wider range of academic and external partners.



- Integration and Collaboration: Considerations of inclusion, equity, value and place are central to this work, thus it integrates naturally with the other thematic areas. Collaboration already exists between the Research Fellows currently working at Westlakes, and we will continue with and build upon this approach.

Activities and methodology

First year activities will include:

- Scoping and selection of potential locations, based on physical and geographical features, presence of physically accessible blue and green space, potential for local partnerships (based on existing contacts).
- Checking and reading relevant academic literature to ensure up-to-date background evidence to underpin the work, and academic justification.
- Meetings and workshops with local contacts who may be interested in working together or being kept updated on the project and who will have relevant local knowledge. This ensures real-world relevance and applicability.
- On the combined basis of the initial scoping, exploration of specific opportunities for working together with external organisations, particularly in the context of applying for external funding.
- Building upon what is already known about engagement with green and blue space in the context of health and wellbeing, the work will examine attitudes towards and psychological barriers to engaging with green and blue space with a life-stage focus. This will include an online survey focusing on engagement with blue space in the selected areas of Cumbria, that could be scaled upwards and outwards depending on findings and available funding. It will also include scope for follow-up work, in response to and building upon the results. The follow-up work will make use of different methodologies as appropriate.
- Results of this will be written up as appropriate output(s), including a peer-reviewed journal article and a non-academic output that would be of interest to external partners. We will also, where relevant, present the findings in partnership with local collaborators in a manner that fits with their priorities and needs, and is appropriately tailored to knowledge exchange and impact indicators (e.g. a co-produced report, presentation or workshop).
- Findings will feed forward into the plan for second and subsequent years, where the focus of the work will shift from understanding to mechanisms for change – i.e. how to reduce the barriers to engagement; how to increase psychological accessibility to green and blue spaces for health and wellbeing. This will involve a deeper exploration of the findings and investigation of how to create change, working with individuals (e.g. using psychological methods to gain a more in-depth understanding) and small groups (e.g. with existing community projects or initiatives, aiming to enhance the work already being done). This phase will then feed in to questions of how to integrate the findings into local policy and



governance for healthy settings, resulting in at least one more journal article, and a report consisting of policy recommendations for local government.

- Building on the first phase of the work, the aim will be to set up a natural experiment to test some of the hypotheses generated. This will involve partnerships and co-production with local collaborators working on community initiatives, social prescribing programmes, or cultural activities.
- Further strands of work to develop beyond the first year will include investigation of mechanisms by which blue and green space exert beneficial effects in different individuals and different contexts and how these considerations can be incorporated into policy and practice, with particular reference to economic value and public benefit. Beyond the first year, we will also explore the possibility of incorporating different methodologies and approaches, to broaden the relevance and scope of the work.

Proposed Timeline

Year 1 (2023-24)	Scoping and Background; Involvement of external partners; Survey. Outputs: publications (one journal article and one non-technical publication for wider audience).
Year 2 (2024-25)	Expansion of survey to a wider area (subject to funding); Building on work from Year 1, development of other methods to explore potential ways to increase accessibility/health and wellbeing potential of local green and blue space. Outputs: at least one journal article and one conference presentation.
Year 3 (2025-26)	Continuation of and building upon research from the first 2 years based on results and findings. Possibility of setting up a natural experiment to test what works, working with local partners. This could form the basis for an external funding bid.
Year 4 (2026-27)	Development of the new strands of work/methodologies started in Year 3, alongside planning for the final year of the project.
Year 5 (2027-28)	Planning for transition from WRL funding. Continuation of the research alongside focus on external funding applications. Further publications and dissemination as appropriate.

Originality and capacity for innovation, invention and added value

Although there is a large body of work documenting the benefits of green space for health and wellbeing, and the use of these in initiatives including (but not limited to) social prescribing, the potential benefits of blue space have received much less attention. There is huge scope to increase understanding of how blue space - in particular local blue space that may be experienced frequently, without having to make special journeys, could be used in similar ways. The coastal and inland communities of Cumberland are an ideal location in which to investigate how these benefits can be harnessed. Since this is not currently being



done, it will require innovation and invention, in collaboration with local partners. Both the process and the outcomes will provide added value to local communities from something that already exists on their doorstep - an abundance of blue space.

The approach will build on previous research and extend current thinking in a way that is timely for policy and governance, emphasizing the importance of settings and place-based approaches. Being located both in the Healthy and Sustainable Settings Unit, and also at Westlakes, ensures the coherence of the approach. The work will be based in communities with the greatest need for health improvement, and, as previous work has indicated, these communities may be the ones who can benefit most. The work thus paves the way for routes to reducing the inequities in health and wellbeing that exist in coastal communities. While being based in Cumbria, the relevance of the work will not be restricted to this area. Future aspirations will be to scale up to national and international levels.

Q2. Describe the expected outputs from the proposed work described in Q1, and how they might impact on discourse in the policy community and political economy through their dissemination.

Expected outputs include (but are not limited to) peer-reviewed journal articles (REF-eligible) and non-academic publications (the form these take will be budget-dependent). Both are important - the journal articles give added credibility to the reports, which will be directed at policy-makers and locally influential individuals. We will also take part in and organise events at appropriate points in order to disseminate the findings and emphasize their relevance to the policy communities, both in Cumbria and beyond. We will participate in and contribute to local health and wellbeing networks, seminars, conferences and other dissemination opportunities as appropriate. The team at Westlakes will put on an international event to showcase innovative research across the thematic areas. We will co-produce outputs in partnership in a manner that is useful to our local collaborators, prioritising the quality of knowledge exchange and potential impact.

Q3. Describe a plausible chain of causality which suggests the impact the proposed work may have in creating public value and contributing to the Common Good

While nature/green and blue space exists all around us, and is potentially available to everyone, not everyone currently benefits from the value of this resource, either maximally or equitably. This work aims to provide a practical and policy framework for making the benefits of local natural spaces more widely and effectively available, thus harnessing some of the untapped value of such spaces in the communities who might benefit from it most, and in doing so contributing to the Common Good.



Q4. State how the proposed plan will address the overarching charitable objects of WRL and the aims and objectives of the Business Plan 2023-2028.

Charitable Objects:

To establish an educational institution

By being based at Westlakes, the work contributes to the physical presence of an educational institution in this location. With the recruitment of a Research Assistant, this will increase both the physical presence and the research capacity. Supporting the RA to undertake and complete a Doctorate is also important for the educational objective. In addition, collaborating with the Research Fellows in the other thematic areas increases the integration and cohesiveness of this research cluster at Westlakes. Contributions to research-informed teaching at UCLan, e.g. for Healthy Settings Module PG4114, and teaching in partnership with the Medical School, also address this Object.

To undertake research and publication

Research is the primary objective and activity in this programme of work. Publication, in particular of high-quality, peer-reviewed papers in well-regarded journals is of central importance, both in terms of fit with UCLan's research strategy and preparation for REF 2029, and also in terms of providing credibility for dissemination beyond the academic sphere.

To advance the education of the public

Although research and academic publication is primary, dissemination to the wider public and policy community is integral to this programme of work. We will be working with external partners to ensure that the direction of the research is relevant and useful, and then translating our findings into appropriate outputs for different audiences. When it comes to the policy community, we aim for our collaborations and dissemination to advance their understanding of what may be possible in terms of policy and governance. However, dissemination will not be restricted to policy makers. Our external partners will include a diverse range of health professionals and voluntary organisations, including arts and cultural organisations, whose participation will provide opportunities for learning more about their members' potential for change. Importantly, we will also co-produce and disseminate findings with and for a more general public audience.

To achieve public benefit

Public benefit is fundamental to this work. It will be achieved, firstly by increasing understanding of how the public can access the health and wellbeing potential – both in terms of quantity and quality – of their local green and blue spaces; and secondly, by devising methods via which this potential for public benefit can be integrated into policy and practice. Involving policy makers, policy influencers and the wider public at all stages will enable creation of a realistic and sustainable framework for achieving (and perhaps quantifying) public benefit.