



SOE 3: Health and Wellbeing

Protecting the environment is an investment in our health and wellbeing.

ACTIONS – WHAT IS NEEDED?

Managing the environmental and radiological risks to health from chemicals and other pollutants is still a major part of environmental protection. Green and blue spaces as well as quiet areas also need to be protected as they provide social spaces for communities and enable a connection to nature, with evidence showing that spending time in such spaces is good for health.



A clean environment benefits health and wellbeing

Impacts

"Environmental noise" is the term given to unwanted sound that comes from human activities like transport and industry.

The World Health Organisation have warned that the health burden of environmental noise is second only to air pollution in Europe.

Clean air is vital for healthy living. The impacts of poor air quality include increased risk of stroke, heart and respiratory diseases.

Air quality is impacted by emissions from numerous sources including vehicle exhausts, burning of solid fuels and by ammonia related emissions from livestock farming.

Some 1300 premature deaths in Ireland each year can be attributed to air pollution.

Radon is a radioactive gas formed in the ground. You can't see, taste or smell it. Outdoors, radon is diluted to very low levels. Inside buildings it can build up to high levels. Radon is carcinogenic and results in an estimated 300 cases of lung cancer each year in Ireland.

People are chronically exposed to a multitude of environmental chemicals in their everyday lives from various sources and through multiple pathways, e.g. consumption of contaminated food or water, breathing polluted air and dust, direct contact with certain chemicals.

Safe drinking water is essential to public health. Safe water is water that is free from any micro-organism or chemical that could adversely impact our health.

Getting outdoors and using our 'green' and 'blue' spaces can offer a multitude of health benefits. These range from increasing our levels of wellbeing and physical activity to reducing stress, improving mental health and using these spaces for community interaction and enhanced social cohesion.

Check the radon levels in your home or business today by taking a radon test, to make sure your levels are safe. If you have high radon the EPA can give you advice on what to do about it.

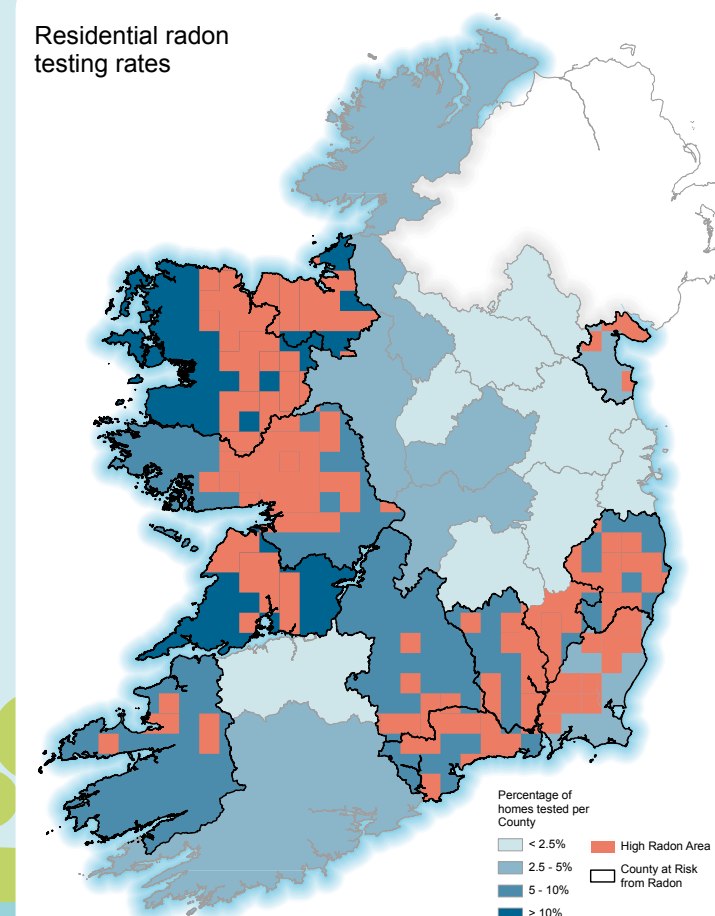
The map on the right shows testing rates in each county. The red squares are high risk areas. The only way to know if you have high radon, and need to take action, is to take a test.

Air quality can be improved in Ireland by making active transport and cleaner, greener transport accessible to everyone. Building and using cycle lanes, investing in and using public transport, a transition away from fossil fuel dependent vehicles to electric vehicles and having safe places to walk all help. Air quality can be improved by moving away from relying on burning solid fuels to heat our homes by switching to cleaner energy sources and by being more energy efficient.

The results of the 2020 drinking water monitoring programme for public water supplies shows 99 per cent compliance with microbiological and chemical standards, based on over 120,000 test results. While this indicates that the majority of public water supplies are safe, further improvements are necessary to make sure that they stay safe in the future.

Responses

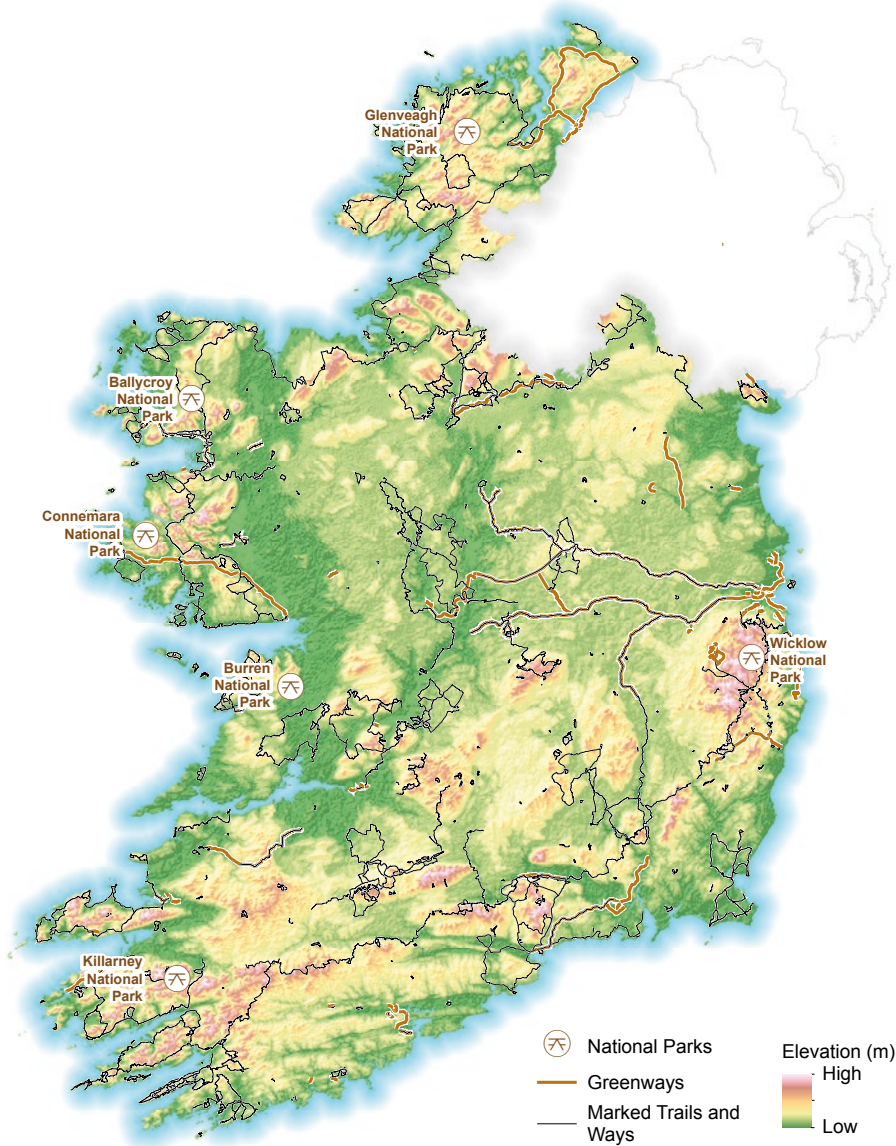
Residential radon testing rates



We need to protect green and blue spaces

Green and blue spaces provide social spaces for communities and a connection to nature, and spending time there is good for your health.

Greenways, Marked Trails and National Parks in Ireland

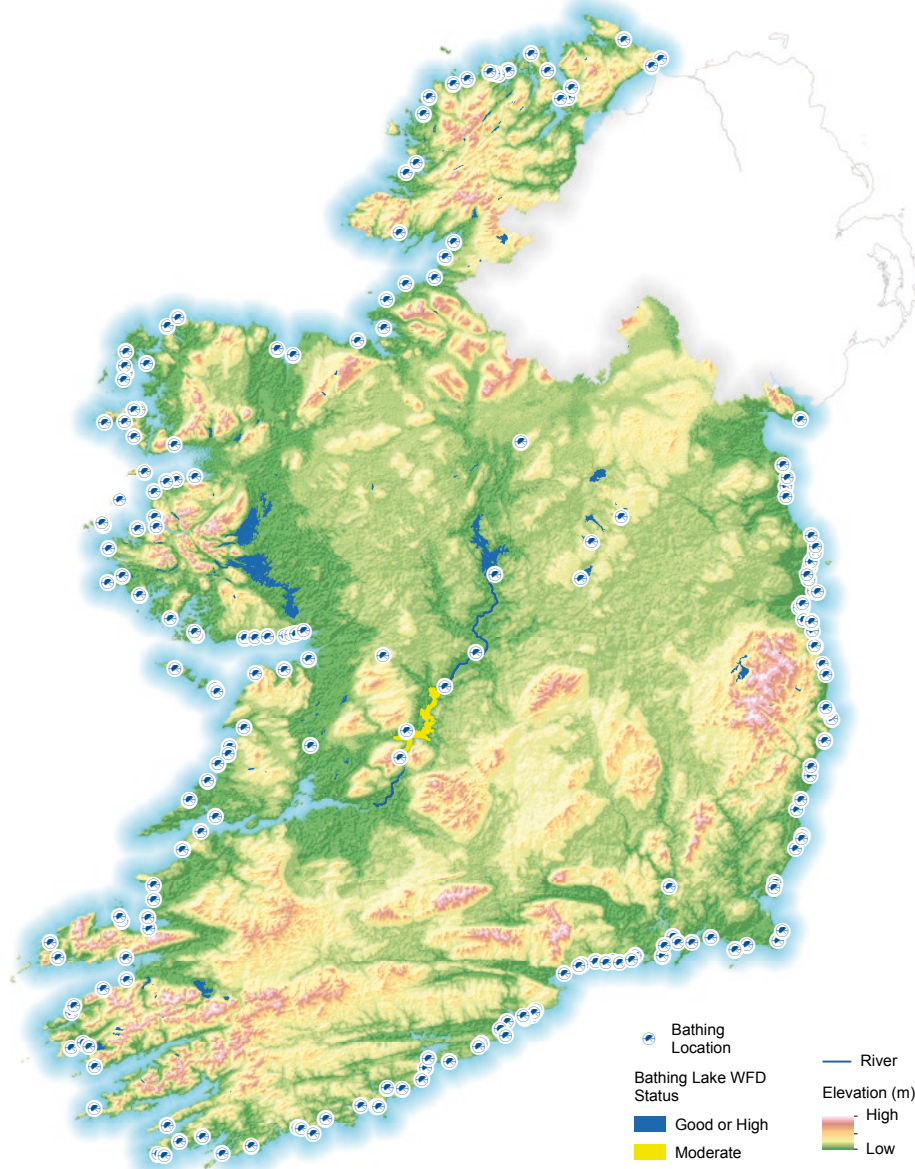


Our green and blue spaces are vital aspects of our natural environment and engagement with these spaces can provide positive health and social outcomes for all groups of society. They also play an important role in reducing our exposure to many everyday hazards and stressors such as air pollution and noise pollution.

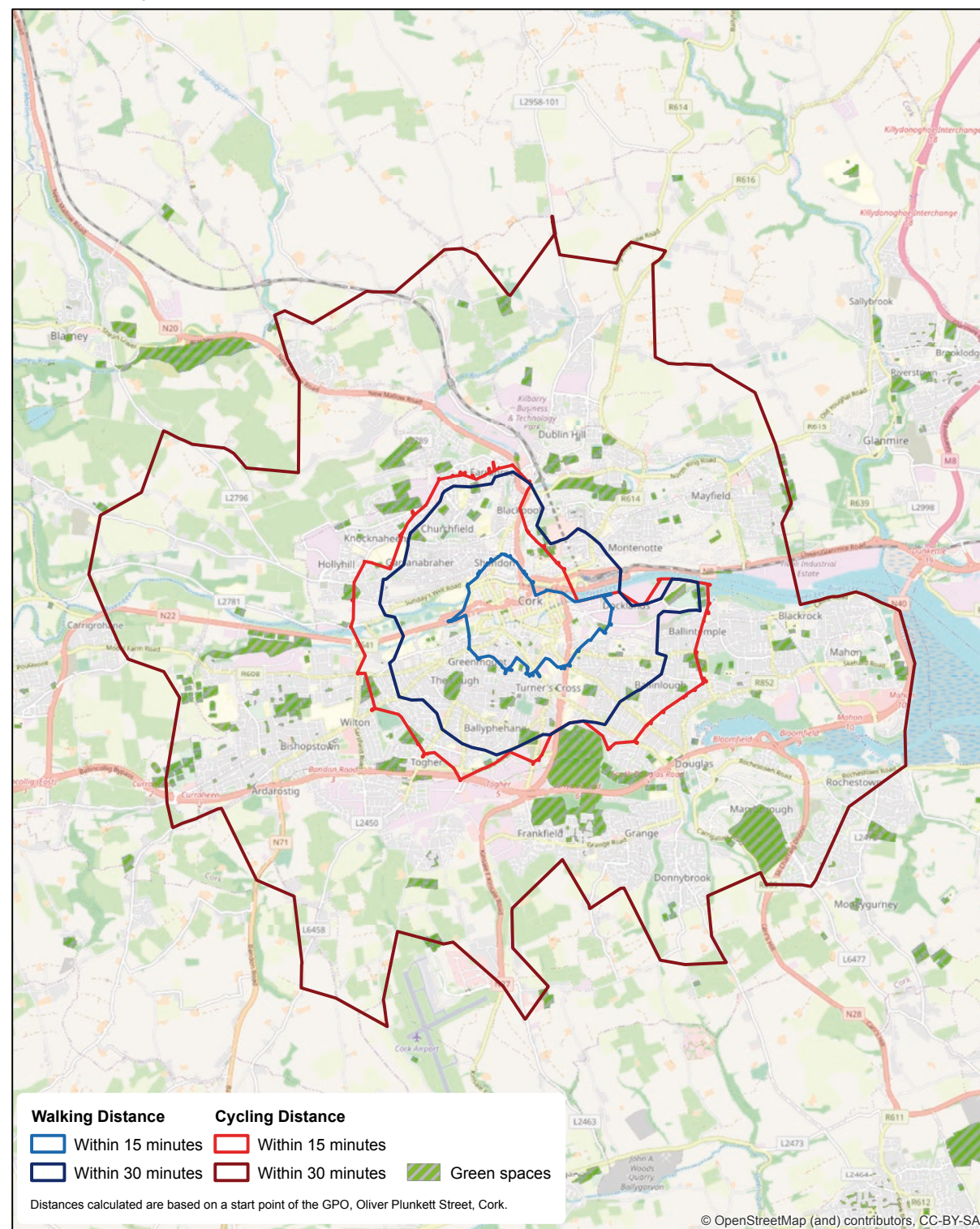
Ireland has an abundance of 'green spaces' – the map on the left shows our greenways, marked trails and national parks. There is an ever-growing body of evidence showing that engagement and contact with the surrounding natural environment is associated with measurable improvements in the health and wellbeing of the population. Exposure to green spaces has been shown to have a positive influence on a range of health outcomes.

While nearly three-quarters of Ireland's bathing waters are classified as excellent, some urban beaches are under pressure, and Ireland ranks well below the EU average for excellent bathing water quality. Investment in waste water treatment is important to help protect our valuable bathing waters as part of our blue space network (see map on the right).

Bathing Locations in Ireland



Cork City: Accessible Green Spaces



Use of Green and Blue Spaces during COVID-19 restrictions in 2020



COVID-19 has significantly altered how we live our daily lives. It has however reminded us of the various physical, mental and social benefits of our outdoor spaces, whether it is exercising or cycling within our 5km, walking our dogs, gardening, taking a dip in the sea or simply enjoying a sunset on a beach.

The COVID-19 and SHEER Wellbeing 2020 research project undertaken for the EPA examined peoples' use of blue and green spaces in Ireland during the pandemic. The study found a significant correlation between peoples' overall health and the days spent outdoors in blue or green spaces in the previous week. Those who spent no time outdoors over the previous week reported the lowest level of 'good' or 'very good' health ratings (52%) whereas those who spent time outdoors on six or seven days over the week had the highest levels of self-reported health (82% and 79%, respectively). On average people over 55 visited blue or green spaces more days than those under 55. However, people in the lowest income group reported the lowest average number of days (2.6 days) spent outdoors in blue or green spaces highlighting a socioeconomic gradient in inequalities in access to and uses of these spaces.

People in urban areas agreed that the blue or green spaces near them were in easy walking distance, but people in isolated areas perceived the blue or green spaces to be beyond easy walking distance. COVID-19 restrictions were cited as a barrier by 20% of respondents: a lack of social distancing was perceived as a problem in Dublin.

When asked about their satisfaction with their local environments, 62% of people scored their satisfaction with their local environments 7 (out of 10) or above with 65% of people saying their local blue spaces were of good enough quality to spend time in, and 76% saying their green spaces were of good enough standard.

The quality of blue/green spaces is linked to their use – people will spend more time engaged in water-based activities in blue spaces if the waters are of high quality. Similarly, the type and quality of green spaces, their perceived attractiveness, accessibility and level of biodiversity are all linked to increased use and improved human health and wellbeing. It is vital therefore that we all play our part in protecting and improving our surrounding natural environment. As we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic we have an opportunity now to alter our behaviour and attitude to our natural environment. We should get outdoors more regularly and appreciate, protect and use our green and blue places to benefit our health and wellbeing, and our environment, now and into the future.

The map on the left shows the various accessible green spaces in Cork City which are within walking or cycling distance (15 or 30 minutes) from the city centre.

