

# Cities & Health

## Social return on investment: reflections on advancing the method within cities & health --Manuscript Draft--

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<b>Manuscript Region of Origin:</b>	UNITED KINGDOM
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## 1 Social Return on Investment: Reflections on Advancing the Method within Cities & Health

### 2 Abstract

3 Social return on investment has received attention from a spectrum of disciplinary areas and  
4 practitioners. In the post-COVID city, the use of the method has increased, in part to provide  
5 data on green and blue schemes, arts and culture projects, innovative place-making solutions  
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7 editorial we urge more engagement with the method amongst submissions to the journal;  
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13 cityscapes.

### 16 Understanding Social Return on Investment

17 Social return on investment is a method which moves beyond merely return on investment and  
18 captures the complex nature of benefits derived from projects which are often unquantifiable  
19 (LSE, 2019). It should be noted that there are numerous definitions and interpretations of the  
20 approach: it can be interpreted as a general approach, or a specific set of standards governed  
21 by Social Value International, or even as a ‘sustainable’ return on investment (see Bohmholdt,  
22 2014). The Social Return on Investment Network (2012) (now Social Value International)  
23 conceptualise it as:

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25 *‘a framework for measuring and accounting for this much broader concept of value; it*  
26 *seeks to reduce inequality and environmental degradation and improve wellbeing by*  
27 *incorporating social, environmental and economic costs and benefits’ (pg.8)*

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29 As a generalised approach, its use is sometimes indistinguishable from cost benefit analysis or  
30 standard public health methodologies for non-National Health Service interventions, such as  
31 quality-adjusted life years or the health equity assessment tool. The defined process, in this  
32 sense the 8 principles and standards from Social Value International, bring clarity and an  
33 emphasis on the perspective of the individual that extends from a qualitative definition of  
34 outcomes, through to valuation and causality (see figure 1). Banke–Thomas (2015 pg.12) found  
35 that ‘the social return on investment methodology provides a platform to systematically  
36 account for broader outcomes’. Allowing individuals to define the outcomes to be measured  
37 and valued, which leads to the inclusion of broader themes. For example, in the city context  
38 this could include: civic pride, environmental awareness, economic opportunity and safety, to  
39 name but a few, that complement health. In this context, social return on investment studies  
40 can demonstrate wider benefits derived from the built environment which are not captured as  
41 explicitly through other approaches.



Figure 1: Social Value International's 8 principles (Social Value International, n.d.)

Whilst cost benefit analysis and public health methodologies, at their best, can also include these wider themes, in practice they often have a narrower focus and can be constrained by policy objectives. Social return on investment goes beyond the objectives of an intervention to assess impact (in the widest sense) and gives a voice to the individuals it has impact on. However, it is also of note that although this distinction remains, Government guidance in the UK for cost benefit analysis (the Green Book) is steadily moving to increase wellbeing in a broader sense. His Majesty's Treasury (2021) now requires that wellbeing concepts, measurement and estimation must be used according to the framework and processes provided by the Green Book.

Social return on investment has proven popular amongst community groups, local authorities, health bodies and other organisations alike, enabling them to demonstrate the significant impact of schemes or initiatives. Understandably, there are many critiques of the methodology, ranging from its explicit focus on monetary valuation, to concerns around the lack of rigor in which the technique has been employed (Hutchinson et al., 2019). In the post-COVID city, the use of the method has been upscaled, in part to convey the value of assets to policy makers and other key actors (Davies et al., 2020; Schoen et al., 2020). There has been a particular rise in the use of social return on investment within the broad area urban green infrastructure, with city

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68 farms, community gardens, parks and a host of other similar schemes employing the approach;  
69 capturing the impact of social prescription schemes, to the value of local food and beyond.

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71 In this editorial, we call for more engagement with the method for the purposes of exploring  
72 innovation in the context of cities and health. In part, this is to facilitate more investment in  
73 radical solutions in cities to address health inequalities and to promote more creative solutions  
74 to mitigate rapid urbanisation. As Grant et al. (2017: 2) argue in the first editorial of the journal,  
75 ‘we need to involve ourselves with an innovative city futures agenda’ and to think outside the  
76 box with regards to urban design. This is reiterated in subsequent editorials, such as Franco et  
77 al’s (2022) reflections on the need for mixed methods studies as a way to generate healthier  
78 urban landscapes. With this in-mind, our editorial argues that social return on investment can  
79 be an vehicle for moving these agendas forwards, through developing healthier place-making  
80 and allowing the city to become a laboratory for change (Grant et al., 2017).

81  
82 We proceed to reflect on a case study to provide an insight into the use of social return on  
83 investment within the realm of advancing the urban green agenda, a popular topic for  
84 discussion within this journal. In this sense, through creating more spaces for green social  
85 prescribing, local food production and wider activities which provide considerable social,  
86 environmental, economic and health benefits. With policy makers and other key actors  
87 burgeoning interest in the approach (Franco et al., 2022; Grant et al., 2017), we call for more  
88 studies in the journal to reflect on the method’s ability to promote health and wellbeing within  
89 cityscapes: from advancing health equity to population and individual health. We also urge for  
90 critical engagement with the approach and aim to provide a snapshot of this within the editorial  
91 itself. This is particularly important, given the often explicit focus on the quantitative outputs of  
92 the methodology. Ultimately, with more novel solutions to addressing health within urban  
93 environments emerging, we aim to highlight the need to advance our understanding of this  
94 approach and its future value within innovations in cities and health.

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96 **Reflections on Practice within Urban Greening Initiatives**

97 Within the urban greening agenda, social value appraisals have been popular, but the use of  
98 social return on investment methodologies have risen rapidly as of late. As Hunter et al. (2020)  
99 note, there has been a rise in the use of the method to quantify the benefits of often intangible  
100 assets; in this case, their study highlights the social return on investment of an urban greenway,  
101 showing that for every £1 invested, there would be between £2 and £6 in value returned.  
102 Green activities form the brunt of many recent social return on investment studies, particularly  
103 those related to the social prescribing agenda. In a study focussing on the social value in the  
104 Natural Health Services, which includes forest schools and other green activities, it was found  
105 that for every £1 invested, some £6.75 of value was derived (Cogent Ventures, 2012). Of  
106 particular note in the study was the impact of the forest school, which was proven to increase  
107 the physical activity and mental wellbeing of young people. Other benefits of this asset included  
108 its ability to enhance social skills, motivate attendees and develop emotional/related skills of  
109 those who participated (Cogent Ventrues, 2012). In addition to this, NEF Consulting (2016)  
110 found that involving a structured programme of environmental activities, through an

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4 111 organisation such as The Conservation Volunteers or Groundwork, could result in a social value  
5 112 of £2.38 for every £1 spent.

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7 114 In the post-COVID city, there has been a particular focus on enabling more creative urban  
8 115 greening solutions, such as upscaled urban agriculture, in which food production is brought into  
9 116 the built environment (Grant et al., 2017; Hardman et al., 2022). At the centre of this large-  
10 117 scale urban agriculture drive is city farming, with rooftops, underground spaces and more  
11 118 mundane environments being converted across the globe to incorporate the practice into the  
12 119 urban fabric. In this context, social return on investments have been around for many years;  
13 120 Figure 2 is an example here and shows such an approach for an average sized urban farm, with  
14 121 the authors stating that ‘for every pound invested in the project by funders, £3.56 of social  
15 122 value is generated’ (FCFCG, 2009: 3). This figure is in line with other social return on investment  
16 123 studies of urban farms, which place the social value generated between the £3.50 and £4.00  
17 124 mark for every pound invested (see Kimberlee and Biggs, 2015; Schoen et al., 2020).  
18 125

	Year 1 (2009)	Year 2 (2010)	Year 3 (2011)	Year 4 (2012)	Year 5 (2013)
Total value of Community Gardening Project to stakeholders	£105,477	£2,749	£1,470	£1,470	£1,470
Total value, adjusted for discount rate of 3.5%	£105,477	£2,656	£1,421	£1,421	£1,421
Total value of Community Gardening Project to stakeholders, adjusted for discount rate					£112,395
Total investment in Community Gardening Project (ie: funding)	£31,600				£31,600
SROI ratio (total adjusted value/total investment)					£3.56

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39 127 Figure 2 – a social return of investment study of a city farm in England (FCFCG, 2009: 21)

40 128  
41 129 Post-COVID, many of these spaces have diversified their offerings and many now employ a ‘care  
42 130 farm’ approach as part of their model; embedding social prescribing to generate additional  
43 131 revenue and enable greater impact on communities. In this sense, conventional health services  
44 132 can prescribe care farming for mental health or other wellbeing issues (Mitchell et al., 2021). In  
45 133 a study commissioned by Lewisham Clinical Commissioning Group, an urban care farm focussing  
46 134 on people recovering from physical and mental health generated an social return on investment  
47 135 value of £83.73 for every pound spent (Growing Together, N.D.). The social value generated by  
48 136 the average care farm is higher in comparison to a ‘traditional’ city farm, with studies showing  
49 137 that this sits between £4.00 for smaller schemes to much higher figures, such as the Lewisham  
50 138 study.

51 139  
52 140 Social return on investment is also popular with early-stage urban agricultural schemes, such as  
53 141 the nascent sector of high-tech city growing through hydroponics, aquaponics or other methods.  
54 142 In Bristol for example, a study found that for every £1 invested in schemes, such as high-tech  
55 143 growing, on average returned some £7 to society in terms of its impacts (Bristol Food Network,  
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144 2015). Further afield, an investment by a company in South Africa of £400,000 into a community  
145 hydroponics project suggested a social return of R1,37 for every R1,00 invested into the project  
146 (Exxaro, 2015). This value has led to significant income for the projects evaluated, enabling  
147 funders to see the intangible benefits of the schemes. With policy makers and other actors often  
148 treasuring quantitative data, it is clear to see why so many urban greening schemes are using  
149 social return on investment to convey their complex and wide-ranging impacts and value.

### 151 **Towards an ‘Ideal’ Approach for SROI**

152 With city greening projects and other urban health interventions increasingly adopting social  
153 return on investment approaches to demonstrate their value, we argue that actors should be  
154 aware of limitations of the methodology and good practice. As we have already mentioned, the  
155 use of social return on investment goes beyond valuation in monetary terms, with Miller et al.  
156 (2016) suggesting that the *‘methodology goes beyond economic analysis by focusing on the value  
157 of outcomes experienced by key stakeholders, rather than focusing solely on investments and  
158 outputs’* (pg. 2). The methodology employed to establish social valuation is complex, due to the  
159 lack of agreement on the approach used to generate calculations across funding, social  
160 organisations and policy making sectors (Mulgan, 2010). Multiple methods have been  
161 incorporated into this research field, covering the breadth of qualitative, quantitative, and  
162 participatory research techniques, as an attempt to demonstrate multiple outcome values from  
163 many stakeholder perceptions.

165 However, reviews of the broad approach show that:

- 167 • The majority of approaches are reported in a non-peer reviewed manner, with Gosselin,  
168 et al. (2020) suggesting that this consists of around 94% of the studies.
- 169 • Banke–Thomas (2015) illustrates that most studies (37.5%) use mixed methods to  
170 generate outcomes, whilst the majority only consider the primary beneficiary (52%),  
171 followed by the beneficiary and those implementing change (7.5%).
- 172 • Hutchinson, et al., (2019) highlights that the quality of studies are *‘highly variable...  
173 weaknesses were observed in other areas including justifying stakeholders, reporting  
174 sample sizes, undertaking sensitivity analysis and reporting unexpected or negative  
175 outcomes’* (pg. 1).

177 In this sense, the literature shows that there is a lack of critical reflection on the use of social  
178 return on investment studies, alongside concerns around how the methodology is employed. In  
179 the context of urban greening, we urge actors to consider these issues and adopt an approach  
180 which values both qualitative and quantitative datasets. Whilst social return on investment can  
181 be a powerful ally, particularly for urban greening projects wishing to demonstrate their value  
182 and impact within cities, there is a need to select an effective and robust methodology. Global  
183 and national standards for social return on investment exist, through bodies such as Social  
184 Value International. This can provide a basis for project leads and other actors, if they are  
185 wishing to engage with the technique; enabling detailed datasets and outcomes which can  
186 overcome the risks highlighted above.

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188 In the context of urban agriculture specifically, there is a real need to draw on methods, such as  
189 social return on investment, to capture the complexity of the activity. As Schoen et al. (2021)  
190 demonstrate, even the smallest community garden can have incredible value: using such an  
191 approach, they showed how one in London returned £3 for every £1 invested. In a similar  
192 manner to figure 1, social return on investment allows for the often intangible to be captured,  
193 which in turn can impact on funding decision, policy support and other key decision-makers  
194 helping to sustain urban agricultural practices. Our editorial here illustrates the use of the  
195 method within urban greening and agricultural projects, which often focus explicitly on tackling  
196 health inequalities within cities. Through social return on investment, we have shown how the  
197 approach can capture the complex value and impact of these schemes, particularly with regards  
198 to health and wellbeing, whilst conveying these messages to key decision-makers. However,  
199 reflections here also highlight the need to adopt rigorous approaches and to also capture the  
200 qualitative. In this sense, going beyond mere monetary value to provide a voice to  
201 communities, users and other benefactors of these schemes.

### 202 **Moving Forwards**

203 In this editorial, we aimed to raise awareness around interest in social return on investment  
204 within the context of cities and health, alongside encouraging more critical engagement with  
205 the approach in the journal. We provided a flavour of its value within urban greening and  
206 agricultural initiatives, which have adopted the approach to demonstrate their broad impacts  
207 and values. Our case study, and wider reflections, highlighted the need to be cautious of the  
208 social return on investment approach adopted, alongside ensuring that empirical evidence  
209 forms the brunt of any investigation. Yet, we have also illustrated the outputs from such  
210 methodologies and the potential to capture novel activities in ways which would be appealing  
211 to decision-makers. We hope this acts as a catalyst for further discussion in the journal and  
212 contributes to calls for approaches to evidence ‘that supports creative city change and  
213 experimentation’ (Grant et al., 2017: 5).

214 We feel that more engagement is particularly important, given the rise in creative approaches  
215 to urban health, especially with the upscaling of green social prescribing and other radical  
216 developments, such as urban agriculture. Future articles may question the role of social return  
217 on investment in advancing such innovations, to revealing more details on the complex value  
218 and impacts of practices. Beyond the urban green agenda, there are also questions around  
219 social return on investment’s wider relevance in promoting sustainable transport and more  
220 meta solutions to creating healthier cityscapes. With decision-makers increasingly investing in  
221 these areas, discussion on social return on investment as a potential enabler is vital within the  
222 agenda of cities and health.

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10

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48 can demonstrate wider benefits derived from the built environment which are not captured as  
49 explicitly through other approaches.

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56 Figure 1: Social Value International's 8 principles (Social Value International, n.d.)

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58 Whilst cost benefit analysis and public health methodologies, at their best, can also include  
59 these wider themes, in practice they often have a narrower focus and can be constrained by  
60 policy objectives. Social return on investment goes beyond the objectives of an intervention to  
61 assess impact (in the widest sense) and gives a voice to the individuals it has impact on.  
62 However, it is also of note that although this distinction remains, Government guidance in the  
63 UK for cost benefit analysis (the Green Book) is steadily moving to increase wellbeing in a  
64 broader sense. His Majesty's Treasury (2021) now requires that wellbeing concepts,  
65 measurement and estimation must be used according to the framework and processes  
66 provided by the Green Book.

67

68 Social return on investment has proven popular amongst community groups, local authorities,  
69 health bodies and other organisations alike, enabling them to demonstrate the significant  
70 impact of schemes or initiatives. Understandably, there are many critiques of the methodology,  
71 ranging from its explicit focus on monetary valuation, to concerns around the lack of rigor in  
72 which the technique has been employed (Hutchinson et al., 2019). In the post-COVID city, the  
73 use of the method has been upscaled, in part to convey the value of assets to policy makers and  
74 other key actors (Davies et al., 2020; Schoen et al., 2020). There has been a particular rise in the  
75 use of social return on investment within the broad area urban green infrastructure, with city  
76 farms, community gardens, parks and a host of other similar schemes employing the approach;  
77 capturing the impact of social prescription schemes, to the value of local food and beyond.

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79 In this editorial, we call for more engagement with the method for the purposes of exploring  
80 innovation in the context of cities and health. In part, this is to facilitate more investment in  
81 radical solutions in cities to address health inequalities and to promote more creative solutions  
82 to mitigate rapid urbanisation. As Grant et al. (2017: 2) argue in the first editorial of the journal,  
83 ‘we need to involve ourselves with an innovative city futures agenda’ and to think outside the  
84 box with regards to urban design. This is reiterated in subsequent editorials, such as Franco et  
85 al’s (2022) reflections on the need for mixed methods studies as a way to generate healthier  
86 urban landscapes. With this in-mind, our editorial argues that social return on investment can  
87 be an vehicle for moving these agendas forwards, through developing healthier place-making  
88 and allowing the city to become a laboratory for change (Grant et al., 2017).

89  
90 We proceed to reflect on a case study to provide an insight into the use of social return on  
91 investment within the realm of advancing the urban green agenda, a popular topic for  
92 discussion within this journal. In this sense, through creating more spaces for green social  
93 prescribing, local food production and wider activities which provide considerable social,  
94 environmental, economic and health benefits. With policy makers and other key actors  
95 burgeoning interest in the approach (Franco et al., 2022; Grant et al., 2017), we call for more  
96 studies in the journal to reflect on the method’s ability to promote health and wellbeing within  
97 cityscapes: from advancing health equity to population and individual health. We also urge for  
98 critical engagement with the approach and aim to provide a snapshot of this within the editorial  
99 itself. This is particularly important, given the often explicit focus on the quantitative outputs of  
100 the methodology. Ultimately, with more novel solutions to addressing health within urban  
101 environments emerging, we aim to highlight the need to advance our understanding of this  
102 approach and its future value within innovations in cities and health.

### 103 104 **Reflections on Practice within Urban Greening Initiatives**

105 Within the urban greening agenda, social value appraisals have been popular, but the use of  
106 social return on investment methodologies have risen rapidly as of late. As Hunter et al. (2020)  
107 note, there has been a rise in the use of the method to quantify the benefits of often intangible  
108 assets; in this case, their study highlights the social return on investment of an urban greenway,  
109 showing that for every £1 invested, there would be between £2 and £6 in value returned.  
110 Green activities form the brunt of many recent social return on investment studies, particularly  
111 those related to the social prescribing agenda. In a study focussing on the social value in the

112 Natural Health Services, which includes forest schools and other green activities, it was found  
 113 that for every £1 invested, some £6.75 of value was derived (Cogent Ventures, 2012). Of  
 114 particular note in the study was the impact of the forest school, which was proven to increase  
 115 the physical activity and mental wellbeing of young people. Other benefits of this asset included  
 116 its ability to enhance social skills, motivate attendees and develop emotional/related skills of  
 117 those who participated (Cogent Ventrues, 2012). In addition to this, NEF Consulting (2016)  
 118 found that involving a structured programme of environmental activities, through an  
 119 organisation such as The Conservation Volunteers or Groundwork, could result in a social value  
 120 of £2.38 for every £1 spent.

121  
 122 In the post-COVID city, there has been a particular focus on enabling more creative urban  
 123 greening solutions, such as upscaled urban agriculture, in which food production is brought into  
 124 the built environment (Grant et al., 2017; Hardman et al., 2022). At the centre of this large-  
 125 scale urban agriculture drive is city farming, with rooftops, underground spaces and more  
 126 mundane environments being converted across the globe to incorporate the practice into the  
 127 urban fabric. In this context, social return on investments have been around for many years;  
 128 Figure 2 is an example here and shows such an approach for an average sized urban farm, with  
 129 the authors stating that ‘for every pound invested in the project by funders, £3.56 of social  
 130 value is generated’ (FCFCG, 2009: 3). This figure is in line with other social return on investment  
 131 studies of urban farms, which place the social value generated between the £3.50 and £4.00  
 132 mark for every pound invested (see Kimberlee and Biggs, 2015; Schoen et al., 2020).

133

	<b>Year 1 (2009)</b>	<b>Year 2 (2010)</b>	<b>Year 3 (2011)</b>	<b>Year 4 (2012)</b>	<b>Year 5 (2013)</b>
Total value of Community Gardening Project to stakeholders	£105,477	£2,749	£1,470	£1,470	£1,470
Total value, adjusted for discount rate of 3.5%	£105,477	£2,656	£1,421	£1,421	£1,421
Total value of Community Gardening Project to stakeholders, adjusted for discount rate					£112,395
Total investment in Community Gardening Project (ie: funding)	£31,600				£31,600
SROI ratio (total adjusted value/total investment)					£3.56

134

135 Figure 2 – a social return of investment study of a city farm in England (FCFCG, 2009: 21)

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137 Post-COVID, many of these spaces have diversified their offerings and many now employ a ‘care  
 138 farm’ approach as part of their model; embedding social prescribing to generate additional  
 139 revenue and enable greater impact on communities. In this sense, conventional health services  
 140 can prescribe care farming for mental health or other wellbeing issues (Mitchell et al., 2021). In  
 141 a study commissioned by Lewisham Clinical Commissioning Group, an urban care farm focussing  
 142 on people recovering from physical and mental health generated an social return on investment  
 143 value of £83.73 for every pound spent (Growing Together, N.D.). The social value generated by  
 144 the average care farm is higher in comparison to a ‘traditional’ city farm, with studies showing

145 that this sits between £4.00 for smaller schemes to much higher figures, such as the Lewisham  
146 study.

147  
148 Social return on investment is also popular with early-stage urban agricultural schemes, such as  
149 the nascent sector of high-tech city growing through hydroponics, aquaponics or other methods.  
150 In Bristol for example, a study found that for every £1 invested in schemes, such as high-tech  
151 growing, on average returned some £7 to society in terms of its impacts (Bristol Food Network,  
152 2015). Further afield, an investment by a company in South Africa of £400,000 into a community  
153 hydroponics project suggested a social return of R1,37 for every R1,00 invested into the project  
154 (Exxaro, 2015). This value has led to significant income for the projects evaluated, enabling  
155 funders to see the intangible benefits of the schemes. With policy makers and other actors often  
156 treasuring quantitative data, it is clear to see why so many urban greening schemes are using  
157 social return on investment to convey their complex and wide-ranging impacts and value.

158

### 159 **Towards an ‘Ideal’ Approach for SROI**

160 With city greening projects and other urban health interventions increasingly adopting social  
161 return on investment approaches to demonstrate their value, we argue that actors should be  
162 aware of limitations of the methodology and good practice. As we have already mentioned, the  
163 use of social return on investment goes beyond valuation in monetary terms, with Miller et al.  
164 (2016) suggesting that the *‘methodology goes beyond economic analysis by focusing on the value  
165 of outcomes experienced by key stakeholders, rather than focusing solely on investments and  
166 outputs’* (pg. 2). The methodology employed to establish social valuation is complex, due to the  
167 lack of agreement on the approach used to generate calculations across funding, social  
168 organisations and policy making sectors (Mulgan, 2010). Multiple methods have been  
169 incorporated into this research field, covering the breadth of qualitative, quantitative, and  
170 participatory research techniques, as an attempt to demonstrate multiple outcome values from  
171 many stakeholder perceptions.

172

173 However, reviews of the broad approach show that:

174

- 175 • The majority of approaches are reported in a non-peer reviewed manner, with Gosselin,  
176 et al. (2020) suggesting that this consists of around 94% of the studies.
- 177 • Banke–Thomas (2015) illustrates that most studies (37.5%) use mixed methods to  
178 generate outcomes, whilst the majority only consider the primary beneficiary (52%),  
179 followed by the beneficiary and those implementing change (7.5%).
- 180 • Hutchinson, et al., (2019) highlights that the quality of studies are *‘highly variable...  
181 weaknesses were observed in other areas including justifying stakeholders, reporting  
182 sample sizes, undertaking sensitivity analysis and reporting unexpected or negative  
183 outcomes’* (pg. 1).

184

185 In this sense, the literature shows that there is a lack of critical reflection on the use of social  
186 return on investment studies, alongside concerns around how the methodology is employed. In  
187 the context of urban greening, we urge actors to consider these issues and adopt an approach  
188 which values both qualitative and quantitative datasets. Whilst social return on investment can

189 be a powerful ally, particularly for urban greening projects wishing to demonstrate their value  
190 and impact within cities, there is a need to select an effective and robust methodology. Global  
191 and national standards for social return on investment exist, through bodies such as Social  
192 Value International. This can provide a basis for project leads and other actors, if they are  
193 wishing to engage with the technique; enabling detailed datasets and outcomes which can  
194 overcome the risks highlighted above.

195  
196 In the context of urban agriculture specifically, there is a real need to draw on methods, such as  
197 social return on investment, to capture the complexity of the activity. As Schoen et al. (2021)  
198 demonstrate, even the smallest community garden can have incredible value: using such an  
199 approach, they showed how one in London returned £3 for every £1 invested. In a similar  
200 manner to figure 1, social return on investment allows for the often intangible to be captured,  
201 which in turn can impact on funding decision, policy support and other key decision-makers  
202 helping to sustain urban agricultural practices. Our editorial here illustrates the use of the  
203 method within urban greening and agricultural projects, which often focus explicitly on tackling  
204 health inequalities within cities. Through social return on investment, we have shown how the  
205 approach can capture the complex value and impact of these schemes, particularly with regards  
206 to health and wellbeing, whilst conveying these messages to key decision-makers. However,  
207 reflections here also highlight the need to adopt rigorous approaches and to also capture the  
208 qualitative. In this sense, going beyond mere monetary value to provide a voice to  
209 communities, users and other benefactors of these schemes.

210

### 211 **Moving Forwards**

212 In this editorial, we aimed to raise awareness around interest in social return on investment  
213 within the context of cities and health, alongside encouraging more critical engagement with  
214 the approach in the journal. We provided a flavour of its value within urban greening and  
215 agricultural initiatives, which have adopted the approach to demonstrate their broad impacts  
216 and values. Our case study, and wider reflections, highlighted the need to be cautious of the  
217 social return on investment approach adopted, alongside ensuring that empirical evidence  
218 forms the brunt of any investigation. Yet, we have also illustrated the outputs from such  
219 methodologies and the potential to capture novel activities in ways which would be appealing  
220 to decision-makers. We hope this acts as a catalyst for further discussion in the journal and  
221 contributes to calls for approaches to evidence ‘that supports creative city change and  
222 experimentation’ (Grant et al., 2017: 5).

223

224 We feel that more engagement is particularly important, given the rise in creative approaches  
225 to urban health, especially with the upscaling of green social prescribing and other radical  
226 developments, such as urban agriculture. Future articles may question the role of social return  
227 on investment in advancing such innovations, to revealing more details on the complex value  
228 and impacts of practices. Beyond the urban green agenda, there are also questions around  
229 social return on investment’s wider relevance in promoting sustainable transport and more  
230 meta solutions to creating healthier cityscapes. With decision-makers increasingly investing in  
231 these areas, discussion on social return on investment as a potential enabler is vital within the  
232 agenda of cities and health.

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## **Social Return on Investment: Reflections on Advancing the Method within Cities & Health**

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### **Abstract**

Social return on investment has received attention from a spectrum of disciplinary areas and practitioners. In the post-COVID city, the use of the approach has increased, in part to provide data on green and blue schemes, arts and culture projects, innovative place-making solutions and other such emerging health interventions within the urban context. Given this rise, in this editorial we urge more engagement with the tool amongst submissions to the journal; advancing the evidence base through the methodology to promote creative health and wellbeing solutions within the city. To illustrate the need for such approaches, we focus on urban greening in particular, to provide a case study of the use of the approach and popularity in this burgeoning area. In doing so, we hope to encourage more studies to engage with the method and to enable more effective use of social return on investment in advancing healthier cityscapes.