

How green spaces in built-up areas can help to meet the environmental challenges of urban living?

Landscape Institute response to the EFRA Select Committee (October 2023)

1. How successfully are the Government and Local Authorities protecting and increasing urban green spaces, and what trends can be seen in the extent and quality of those spaces?

Increasing burdens on local authority budgets have led to cuts in the management and maintenance of urban green spaces. Many of these urban green spaces are not laid out as parks, gardens or recreational facilities, but are often nondescript two-dimensional areas of grass or incidental left-over patches of land, with limited value and ongoing maintenance costs. However, virtually all urban open space, including incidental or 'left over' land (e.g. space associated with transport corridors), has the potential to contribute to natural capital and should be valued and designed to deliver this, rather than neglected or concreted over.

Over the past decade or more, there has been little new public investment in creating or revitalising urban green spaces, other than provision associated with new development and that required by the planning system. This may be of variable quality as it is highly dependent on the levels and inputs of design expertise and monitoring of standards from both the developer and the planning authority, with both parties often focussing on other operational priorities. There can be a significant disconnect between the visual representations produced for planning submissions and delivery on the ground.

Ongoing management and maintenance of urban green space represent further challenges that need to be adequately resourced, both in skills and funding, to ensure that the objectives of initial capital investment are realised. Organic plant or 'soft landscape' materials and their associated ecosystem service benefits, are of course particularly susceptible to both damage and neglect at all stages from pre-planting preparations through to post-establishment maintenance.

If the quality of much of our urban green space is poor or simply bland and uninspiring, it is less attractive to most users and less functional in terms of its wider ecosystem services contributions. As unloved space, it enters a process of decay and decline and may well be perceived as having negative rather than positive value by local communities, with concerns regarding appearance, pollution and security. Reversing such decline can incur significant investment and failure can lead to the risk of permanent loss of amenity through development.

Urban green space forms an important part of what is referred to as landscape. Landscape exists everywhere and comprises rural landscapes, seascapes and townscapes, all of which deserve full consideration in policy terms. Presently, the Government's Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP) does not recognise this definition of landscape, being solely concerned with 'protected' and 'designated' landscapes e.g. National Parks, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) and other such areas. This could usefully be amended to include all landscapes, with urban green space given far greater prominence within the Plan.

2. What environmental challenges are urban areas facing, and how could wider access and inclusion to green spaces (including dog-friendly spaces) address these challenges? Areas to consider but not limited to:

- **Increased temperatures and the 'urban heat island' effect**
- **Flooding risks and water quality in urban watercourses**
- **Air pollution and the associated health implications**
- **Noise pollution**
- **Climate change and carbon storage**
- **Pressures on biodiversity and ecosystems in urban centres**
- **Resource and waste management**

All urban green space has the potential to contribute positively as part of a broader green infrastructure network, providing multi-functional ecosystem services benefits, as listed in the question. This principle is applicable to a highway verge or a street tree as well as a city park. To deliver its potential, green space needs to be designed and managed with these multiple functions embedded and this requires that the space is valued accordingly. DEFRA is developing mechanisms for funding rural farm and estate owners through payments for ecosystem services and this mindset could usefully be applied to urban areas.

Recognising the tangible financial value that urban green space can deliver in social, economic and environmental terms is key to unlocking the investment in design and management needed to ensure that this is achieved. There has been something of a sea change in understanding the value of natural capital, in recent years. This was reflected in the findings of 'The Economics of Biodiversity: The Dasgupta Review' (February 2021) and the Government's welcome response to that review (July 2021).

Raising public awareness of the value of urban green space and the many benefits that it can deliver may be a 'chicken and egg' issue. By improving the quality of provision, public awareness, support and enjoyment will be promoted. This should result in wider access, greater sense of ownership and appreciation and more sustainable usage. However, improving quality requires investment and this needs to be justified through a recognition of payback. As most of the benefits are intangible and largely in the public interest, the commercial market does not see a return, so there must either be regulatory intervention (i.e. through the planning system) or direct investment by state agencies (as for farm subsidies and countryside stewardships).

Commercialisation of urban green space, for example through festivals or sporting activities, may provide some income opportunity that could be re-invested. However, this comes with some elements of risk. It can potentially carry the cost of excluding those who can't afford to or don't wish to participate. Other unintended consequences include physical damage to the site as a result of inclement weather and limiting the multi-functional potential of the land.

3. To what extent will Government initiatives such as the Green Infrastructure Framework, the levelling up parks fund and urban tree challenge fund adequately address the issues associated with a lack of green space in towns and cities?

The government initiatives on greening towns and cities require a cross-departmental strategic approach to ensure that any decisions related to land management incorporate

green infrastructure implications – and opportunities. If a sustainable and multi-functional green infrastructure network is to be delivered, it could usefully include institutional and operational land managed by bodies such as MoD, NHS, National Rail, Highways England and be co-ordinated with local authority and Defra family land assets and, where possible, privately owned peri-urban estate and farm land.

The creation of a Land Use Commission for England might be an appropriate body to have oversight of such a co-ordinated approach. There is a need for appropriate landscape expertise in government departments, local authorities and other land-managing bodies to guide and advise on how the government ‘urban greening’ strategic objectives can best be delivered at a local level.

Making towns and communities greener and nature rich is also about ‘placemaking’. It’s about connecting people to places, nature and to one other. This includes meaningful engagement and involvement of communities in the planning and design process. It requires collaboration and creativity, and benefits from local champions.

4. Will the Government achieve its aims to increase the amount of green cover to 40% in urban residential areas? What other additional measures should the Government take to increase green urban space?

The planning system is a vital mechanism for delivering green cover related to new development in urban areas. All new development, at all scales, including small householder projects, could usefully be required to make a proportionate contribution to green infrastructure or a financial contribution where this is agreed as being impossible within the development site. All local planning authorities who have yet to adopt a green infrastructure strategy should be encouraged to do so, co-ordinated with adjoining authorities, and by identifying and allocating green infrastructure sites within their local development plan.

Apart from the role of the planning system, the government could usefully develop and introduce payments for ecosystem services system that recognises the value of green cover and provides funding for the landowner in urban areas. This could be used as an incentive for public and private landowners at all scales to enhance the functionality of their assets, e.g. by planting trees, increasing biodiversity, improving access, etc., thus increasing the natural capital value and payments received.

Every Local Authority maintaining an asset register with the key features listed and mapped on GIS/plans will have information on a range of sites with details on ‘embodied carbon’ (e.g. soils, trees, canopy cover etc), water management infrastructure (e.g. lakes, dry storage areas etc), ecological features (rivers, streams, ditches etc) and, most importantly, people-related facilities (access, footpaths, play facilities etc).

5. Is access to urban green spaces equally distributed across all sectors of society? Do the environmental and associated health risks disproportionately impact certain groups? What barriers to access exist and how can they be addressed?

By using geographical data sources such as Natural England’s Green Infrastructure map with identified areas of social and economic deprivation, an analysis of relationships can enable gaps in provision to be identified, and opportunities for intervention sought and applied.

Some sectors of communities feel excluded from urban green spaces due to a range of factors, including age, disability, cultural background, sectoral interests and gender. Whilst there are benefits in tailoring parts of urban open space to meet specific interests such as

sports, dog walking, children's play, food growing and horticulture, there is a need to recognise that urban green spaces should generally work as common ground and be perceived as open and welcoming to all sectors of the community. High quality, inclusive design for diverse needs and uses should be supplemented by effective local community engagement and ongoing involvement and sense of ownership.

Landscape professionals are experienced in engaging with and involving communities in open space design, management and maintenance. Community workers can also play a key role in promoting and encouraging active involvement by members of the community, including hard to reach groups, in the ongoing use of urban green space. This can help hugely in developing community cohesion and reducing anti-social behaviour. A 21st Century equivalent of the park-keeper, retitled and redirected as the Urban Greenspace Ranger, may provide the key link between urban green space and all sectors of the community feeling welcome.

The Landscape Institute Journal 'Whose landscape is it?' edition provides a variety of articles on the inclusivity of urban green spaces and may be viewed or downloaded from https://issuu.com/landscape-institute/docs/landscape_journal_whose_landscape_i_a41cbf7b402582

As mentioned, DEFRA's 262-page 'Environment Improvement Plan 2023' is the first 5-year revision of its 25-Year Plan. The word 'urban' appears within the text on only 29 occasions. The plan reports several existing commitments including the £250m spend on the Urban Trees Challenge Fund, the Local Authority Treescapes Fund together with the Levelling Up Parks Fund.

The Landscape Institute would welcome greater emphasis being placed on the protection of existing green spaces in urban areas and a commitment to explore and set ambitious targets to increase the number and quality of new green spaces in urban areas, particularly those in deprived communities. The existing footprint of green space in urban areas does not match where the need is greatest. The redevelopment of brownfield sites within towns and cities can be a positive force in the creation of new much-needed, sustainable and affordable housing provision nestling alongside and integrated with new urban green space.

We would greatly welcome the opportunity to discuss the ideas raised in this response with the members of the Select Committee.

The Landscape Institute is a charitable professional membership body working to protect, conserve and enhance the natural and built environment for public benefit. Our 6,000 Members are 'subject matter experts' for landscapes, townscape and seascapes. They have considerable working experience of maximising urban green space across a wide range of settings from new residential developments and town centre revitalisation to urban greening within existing settlements and communities.

October 2023