Evidence for EFRA inquiry on urban green spaces

October 2023

This evidence is on behalf of nature and animal welfare coalition Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link) for the EFRA call for evidence on urban green spaces.

Executive summary

Currently, 38% of people in England do not have access to nature within a 15 minute walk of home. It is not clear if and how the Government will meet its commitment to ensure all people live within a 15 minute walk of a high quality green or blue space.

Existing Government initiatives are not sufficient to adequately address the issues associated with a lack of urban green space. Existing funding pots are one-offs and fall far short of the £5.5 billion estimated needed to upgrade urban green spaces in the most deprived neighbourhoods. Despite great public interest and use of urban green spaces, these spaces have declined in quantity and quality over past decades due to declining parks budgets, poor quality development, short-term and uncoordinated investment, and lack of strategic planning of green spaces.

To meet its own access commitment and to harness the environmental and health benefits of urban green spaces for all communities, the Government must:
- Set a legally-binding target for access to nature, supported by a national strategic plan with the policies, actions, and funding needed to meet the target.
- Require and fund each local planning authority to prepare, consult on, and report on a local Green Infrastructure Strategy, in line with the Green Infrastructure Standards, which assesses local green space provision and sets local targets to progress towards meeting the 15 minute commitment.
- Mandate all new development meet the Green Infrastructure Standards, including the 15 minute commitment.
- Pledge £5.5 billion over 5 years to local authorities to level up urban green spaces and a longer-term programme of investment for green infrastructure.
- Introduce a new human right for access to a healthy natural environment to embed access to urban green spaces in all public body policy and decision-making.

Responses to inquiry questions

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?

1. Urban green spaces in England have declined in quantity and quality over recent decades.
    a. Neighbourhoods dominated by the most recent generation of housebuilding (2009 – 2021) have up to 40% less green space provision (parks) than neighbourhoods dominated by late 19th- and early 20th century housing. The total amount of green space found within 1km of a development declines steadily the younger the housing stock, found the New Economics Forum.[1]
    b. NEF analysis also demonstrated that people living in post-2000 neighbourhoods are almost twice as likely to report having no access to a garden, than those in developments dominated by housing from 1930 to 1999. If they do have access, they are 30% more likely to report that they do not like their garden.[2]
    c. The condition of UK parks is at its lowest since 2014, found a survey from the Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE) in its regular report on the State of UK Public Reports in 2021. Between 2013 and 2021, the proportion of parks in 'good condition,' as reported by local authority park managers, declined from 60% to 40%.[3]

2. The reasons for the decline of urban green spaces include:
    a. Lack of robust green space standards for developers in new developments.[4]
    b. Significant cuts to local authority parks budgets (an estimated £190 million from 2016 – 2021 alone), resulting in the loss of parks staff and skills. [5]
    c. Loss of core funding and capacity for local authorities, with core council funding has reduced by over £250 million from 2010 – 2021.[6]
    d. Short-term and uncoordinated programmes of investment, compounded by lack of local authority capacity, resulting in a loss of external income

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[1] https://neweconomics.org/2022/05/exposed-the-collapse-of-green-space-provision-in-england-and-wales
[2] https://neweconomics.org/2022/05/exposed-the-collapse-of-green-space-provision-in-england-and-wales
[3] https://www.apse.org.uk/apse/index.cfm/research/current-research-programme/state-of-uk-public-parks-2021/
[4] https://neweconomics.org/2022/05/exposed-the-collapse-of-green-space-provision-in-england-and-wales
[5] https://www.apse.org.uk/apse/?LinkServID=6F6C3880-FBA4-259F-18889D4F13AC7765
[6] https://www.local.gov.uk/parks-fit-future

generation for parks (due to particular impacts from COVID-19, some parks estimated up to £8.8 million lost from external income in 2020/2021).[7]

    e. Lack of a strategic approach to green space planning, management, and funding.[8]

    f. Lack of coordination and join-up between Government departments, including DLUHC, Defra, DfT and DHSC. This is despite recent work on urban green spaces from the LUHC Select Committee, a 2017 inquiry on public parks.[9] A Health and Social Care Committee inquiry could be useful to highlight the human health benefits and help make the case for significant action and investment in urban green spaces.

3. The current state of urban green spaces in England is poor, with millions of people not having access to thriving urban green spaces.

    a. 38% of people in England do not have access to green or blue space within 15 minutes' walk of their home, as per the Government's figures.[10]

    b. More than 70% of people do not have green space within 15 minutes' walk of home in a third of English local authority areas. In one in ten English local authority areas, 90% of the population have no access to nature within 15 minutes of home.[11]

    c. There are 6.1 million people in GB without access to a green space within a 10 minute walk of home.[12]

4. There are vast disparities in the quantity, quality, and access to urban greenspaces.

    a. The most deprived communities in England (as ranked in England's index of multiple deprivation) are more than twice as likely as wealthy communities to live in areas with a low amount of natural space per person.[13] Residents of the most deprived areas across England and Wales have to travel 48% further to enjoy the freedom to roam.[14] Residents of the wealthiest areas in England and

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[7] https://www.local.gov.uk/parks-fit-future

[8] https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/a_review_of_londons_parks_green_spaces.pdf

[9] https://committees.parliament.uk/work/1890/public-parks-inquiry/

[10] https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1168372/environmental-improvement-plan-2023.pdf

[11] https://www.wcl.org.uk/assets/uploads/img/files/Mapping_access_to_nature_in_England_01.05.23.pdf

[12] https://www.fieldsintrust.org/green-space-index

[13] https://www.wcl.org.uk/assets/uploads/img/files/Mapping_access_to_nature_in_England_01.05.23.pdf

[14] https://www.ramblers.org.uk/what-we-care-about/expand-freedom-roam

Wales have 80% more paths in their local area than the residents of the most deprived areas.[15]

b. A Black, Asian or minority ethnic person is twice as likely as a white person to live in an area in England which is most deprived of green space. Almost 40% of BAME people live in England's most green space-deprived neighbourhoods as compared to 14% of white people.[16] Residents in the most ethnically diverse neighbourhoods have to travel 73% further to enjoy the freedom to roam. This trend is not explained by living in a rural or urban area – urban residents only live 18% further away from the freedom to roam than those in rural areas.[17] The most white-dominated areas in England and Wales have 144% more local paths than the most ethnically diverse areas.[18]

c. Data on the provision and accessibility of urban green spaces for disabled people is insufficient and this lack of information should be rectified.[19] However, research has found that disabled people are significantly less likely to access nature with 29% of disabled people reporting not visiting a natural green or blue space in the last month, as compared to 18% of non-disabled people.[20]

d. There are also disparities in the provision of public green space across regions in England. The regions with the lowest quality parks are Yorkshire and the Humber, the North West, the North East, and the West Midlands, according to the State of UK Parks Report 2021.[21] The Fields in Trust Green Space Index found that the North East and London had the poorest access to green space, while the South East of England had the best access to green space.[22]

5. The poor and declining provision and state of urban green spaces in England is despite huge public appetite, interest and use of these spaces.

a. More than six in ten people surveyed for Natural England's People and Nature Survey had visited green and natural spaces in the previous two weeks.

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[15] https://www.ramblers.org.uk/who-has-access-our-paths

[16] https://policy.friendsoftheearth.uk/insight/englands-green-space-gap

[17] https://www.ramblers.org.uk/what-we-care-about/expand-freedom-roam

[18] https://www.ramblers.org.uk/who-has-access-our-paths

[19] https://www.wcl.org.uk/assets/uploads/img/files/Mapping_access_to_nature_in_England_01.05.23.pdf

[20] https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/the-people-and-nature-survey-for-england-adult-data-y1q1-april-june-2020-experimental-statistics/the-people-and-nature-survey-for-england-adult-data-y1q1-april-june-2020-experimental-statistics

[21] https://www.apse.org.uk/apse/index.cfm/research/current-research-programme/state-of-uk-public-parks-2021/

[22] https://www.fieldsintrust.org/green-space-index

Gardens and urban and local green spaces were particularly important for spending time outdoors.[23]

b. A 2020 RSPB poll found 4 out of 5 people in England wanted the Government to increase the number of accessible nature-rich areas as part of a green recovery from Covid-19.[24]

c. 73% of UK adults surveyed in 2021 said that connecting with nature has been important in terms of managing their mental health during the pandemic.[25]

d. Polling conducted by Link in January 2022 found that 80% of people want a 'legal right to local nature', with 83% saying having access to local natural spaces is more important post-pandemic.[26]

e. Local access to nature was one of the key priorities of the People's Plan for Nature, a vision for the future of nature developed by the People's Assembly for Nature.[27]

6. It is also despite the enormous benefits, including financial benefits and cost savings, to people, to local places and economies, and to the public sector.

a. There is robust scientific evidence of the physical and mental health benefits of a healthy natural environment, including clean air, clean water, and access to nature-rich green and blue spaces. People who live in areas with higher amounts of green space live longer.[28] There are also significant wellbeing benefits to urban green spaces. People who are more connected to nature have higher life satisfaction.[29]

b. The resulting cost savings to the public health sector are enormous: every £1 spent on greener urban parks could result in £200 in savings for the NHS.[30] Another estimate, by Natural England, found that giving everyone in England good access to greenspace, never mind improving air quality, would reduce

[23] https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/the-people-and-nature-survey-for-england-year-2-annual-report-data-and-publications-april-2021-march-2022-official-statistics-main-findings/the-people-and-nature-survey-for-england-year-2-annual-report-data-and-publications-april-2021-march-2022-official-statistics-main-findings#most-people-spend-time-in-gardens-and-urbanlocal-green-spaces

[24] https://www.rspb.org.uk/about-the-rspb/about-us/media-centre/press-releases/nature-and-a-green-recovery-from-covid-19/

[25] https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/sites/default/files/MHAW21_NATURE%20REPORT_ENG_web.pdf

[26] https://www.wcl.org.uk/nature-for-everyone-polling.asp

[27] https://peoplesplanfornature.org/sites/default/files/2023-03/PPFN-ExecutiveSummary-160323-FINAL%20W%20Links_0.pdf

[28] https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/26540085/

[29] https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/25249992/

[30] https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/our-cause/communities/new-research-reveals-need-for-urban-green-space

NHS pressures to such an extent as to save £3 billion in health spending every year (updated for inflation).[31]

    c. As well as central to creating healthy places for people to live, urban green spaces contribute significantly to the economic and social success of a neighbourhood. Parks and urban green spaces are central to communities, creating cohesion and identity.[32] Quality greenspace can have a positive impact on creating settings for investment and acting as a catalyst for wider regeneration.[33] Neighbourhoods with more green space are more desirable and housing prices rise by an average of £2,500.[34] National Trust research demonstrated that £5.5 billion of investment in greener cities could support 40,000 jobs in construction and 6,000 permanent jobs.[35]

7. We also wish to note the importance of asking these questions in the future about blue spaces, and considering the multiple benefits that they can provide for people and nature within urban environment.

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:

1. **Increased temperatures and the 'urban heat island' effect**
2. **Flooding risks and water quality in urban watercourses**
3. **Air pollution and the associated health implications**
4. **Noise pollution**
5. **Climate change and carbon storage**
6. **Pressures on biodiversity and ecosystems in urban centres**
7. **Resource and waste management**

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[31] https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/904439/Improving_access_to_greenspace_2020_review.pdf

[32] https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmcomloc/45/45.pdf

[33] https://designatedsites.naturalengland.org.uk/GreenInfrastructure/Principles/WhyPrinciples.aspx

[34] https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/environmentalaccounts/articles/urbangreenspacesraisenearbyhouseprices byanaverageof2500/2019-10-14

[35] https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/our-cause/communities/new-research-reveals-need-for-urban-green-space

8. Urban areas are facing all these environmental challenges. Increased provision of, environmental enhancement, and wider access and inclusion to urban green spaces could help address all of these environmental challenges.

   a. Urban heating

      i. Urban green spaces, particularly urban trees, provide shade and evapotranspiration, reducing day time temperatures in urban areas, especially in the summer.[36]

      ii. Cooling urban areas and reducing heat stress for humans in urban environmental can also have benefits for urban wildlife.[37]

   b. Flooding and water quality

      i. Urban green spaces and wider green infrastructure reduces flood risk, helping alleviate pressure on the water environment and infrastructure, providing significant economic and health benefits for people and communities, and contributing to climate adaptation. Green infrastructure such as trees, green roofs, rain gardens, gardens, wildflower road verges, sustainable urban drainage systems (SuDS), and other permeable vegetated surfaces, including open green spaces, planned and delivered correctly, can reduce the speed and volume of water reaching drains, sewers, and watercourses, reducing the risk of flooding and storm overflow spills, and putting the water to beneficial use, recharging groundwater rather than water ending up in drains.[38]

      ii. Urban green spaces and wider green infrastructure can also help improve water quality as vegetation can help trap, filter out, and reduce contaminants before they are released into the environment. Again, this improved water quality benefits both human health and the health of wildlife and wider ecosystems.[39]

      iii. Finally, green infrastructure can improve water availability by helping maintain the natural water cycle and improving sustainable drainage at a local and catchment scale, reducing pressure on the water environment. Sustainable water management through green

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[36] https://designatedsites.naturalengland.org.uk/GreenInfrastructure/downloads/GreenInfrastructurePrinciples.pdf

[37] https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/gcb.16645

[38] https://designatedsites.naturalengland.org.uk/GreenInfrastructure/downloads/GreenInfrastructurePrinciples.pdf

[39] https://designatedsites.naturalengland.org.uk/GreenInfrastructure/downloads/GreenInfrastructurePrinciples.pdf

infrastructure can support climate adaptation and improve communities' resilience to too little or too much water. A catchment-based approach can link local green and blue infrastructure to link to large watercourses and rivers, with greater benefits for water management and biodiversity.[40]

c. Air pollution
   i. Air pollution can have harmful effects on biodiversity, ecosystem services, human health, and contribute to climate change.[41]
   ii. Urban green spaces, in particular trees and other vegetation, reduce air pollution and improve air quality by absorbing harmful gases and filtering particles in the air.[42]

d. Noise pollution
   i. Urban green spaces and wider green infrastructure, especially trees, can help mitigate noise pollution, by absorbing noise.[43]
   ii. As noise pollution has harmful impacts on both human health[44] and the health of wildlife.[45]

e. Climate mitigation and carbon storage
   i. Urban green spaces and green infrastructure can reduce carbon emissions in a variety of ways. Urban green spaces can be part of low carbon approaches to design, construction and long-term maintenance. Renewable energy can be incorporated in to green space, such as ground-source heat pumps. Waterways can play a role in the provision of thermal energy for heating and cooling systems. Attractive cycling and walking routes can promote active travel options and reduce carbon emission from cars. Trees can give shade to buildings, reducing the need for air conditioning, and saving carbon emissions.

[40] https://designatedsites.naturalengland.org.uk/GreenInfrastructure/downloads/GreenInfrastructurePrinciples.pdf
[41] https://jncc.gov.uk/our-work/air-pollution/
[42] https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0048969721036779
[43] https://isprs-archives.copernicus.org/articles/XLVIII-4-W3-2022/195/2022/isprs-archives-XLVIII-4-W3-2022-195-2022.pdf
[44] https://www.eea.europa.eu/articles/noise-pollution-is-a-major
[45] https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fevo.2023.1130075/full

ii. Urban green spaces and green infrastructure, including trees, meadows, wildflower road verges, healthy soils, and other nature-based solutions, sequester carbon, providing carbon storage.[46]

f. Biodiversity and ecosystems in urban areas

i. Urban green spaces and wider green infrastructure can provide more, bigger areas for nature, and more connected areas for nature, essential for supporting habitats and wildlife and functioning ecosystems.[47]

ii. In the UK, the abundance of key urban species fell by 10% between 2002 and 2013.[48] At the same time, urban areas are expanding in size and density in the UK.[49]

iii. Urban green spaces provides essential habitats and spaces for wildlife, especially with nature-deprived areas.[50] In fact, the availability of vegetated habitat area influences urban biodiversity more than any other factors.[51] While green infrastructure such as trees, street parks, and riverside banks also support urban biodiversity, large urban parks and green spaces support more biodiversity.[52]

iv. Green corridors and green routes within urban areas are also important for wildlife conservation in urban areas, enabling the safe dispersal of animals with urban areas.[53] For example, over 700 species of wildflowers could grow on well-managed verges, accounting for nearly 45% of our total plant diversity and supporting a host of pollinators and other biodiversity. The adoption of a few basic management principles will significantly improve the biodiversity on our verges and help reduce management costs.[54]

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[46] https://designatedsites.naturalengland.org.uk/GreenInfrastructure/downloads/GreenInfrastructurePrinciples.pdf

[47] https://www.gov.uk/government/news/making-space-for-nature-a-review-of-englands-wildlife-sites-published-today

[48] https://www.nhm.ac.uk/discover/urban-wildlife.html

[49] https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/60cb1dc18fa8f57cf3f0b356/GO-Science_Trend_Deck_-_Urbanisation_section_-_Spring_2021.pdf

[50] https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fevo.2022.958572/full

[51] https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/ele.12427

[52] https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11252-013-0316-1

[53] https://iopscience.iop.org/article/10.1088/1755-1315/18/1/012093/pdf

[54] Managing-grassland-road-verges_2020.pdf (plantlife.org.uk)

v. There are many standards, guidance and advice available for managers of green spaces and open spaces, including in urban areas, on good management for nature to enhance biodiversity.[55]

g. Light pollution

   i. Scientists estimate that light pollution is increasing globally 10% every year.[56]

   ii. Light pollution can impact negatively on human health through disrupting sleep and circadian rhythms, which leads to negative social and economic impacts.[57]

   iii. Artificial light at night is an increasingly recognised threat to biodiversity and ecosystem processes.[58, 59, 60]

   iv. Urban spaces such as parks, open space, observing site, or other similar property near or surrounded by large urban environs, can promote an authentic nighttime experience, reconnecting the public to a natural nocturnal environment.[61] Through proper planning and design, better community friendly lighting can create suitable lighting harmonising human needs with those of nature.

9. The lack of access to nature and connection to nature in the UK is a significant environmental challenge. People who are connected to nature take action to protect and restore it.[62] However, currently 38% of people in England do not have access to nature within 15 minutes' walk of their home.[63] The UK ranks lowest of 14 European countries for nature connectedness.[64] Re-connecting people with nature and empowering people to take action for nature will be essential to tackle the biodiversity and climate crises.

   a. Both frequent contact with nature and high nature connectedness (a person's emotional and cognitive relationship to nature) are associated with

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[55] https://designatedsites.naturalengland.org.uk/GreenInfrastructure/downloads/GreenInfrastructurePrinciples.pdf

[56] https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.abq7781

[57] https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld5803/ldselect/ldsctech/232/23203.htm#_idTextAnchor001

[58] https://www.cell.com/trends/ecology-evolution/fulltext/S0169-5347(10)00221-1

[59] https://www.nature.com/articles/S41559-020-01322-x

[60] https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/gcb.13927

[61] https://darksky.org/what-we-do/international-dark-sky-places/dark-sky-place-types/

[62] https://besjournals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/pan3.10117

[63] https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1168372/environmental-improvement-plan-2023.pdf

[64] https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s13280-022-01744-w

pro-environmental behaviours.[65] Reported pro-environmental behaviours were highest among people who also reported both high visit frequency to natural environments and high nature connectedness.[66]

b. As well as contact with nature, there are other pathways to promote nature connection, including emotion, meaning, compassion and beauty.[67] There is more limited but growing evidence and resources on how urban green spaces, land managers, and environmental educators can manage green spaces and facilitate experiences within urban green spaces to promote nature connection.[68]

10. There is robust evidence that green spaces, in particular biodiverse green spaces, has significant benefits for human health and wellbeing.

a. Green spaces protect and promote good physical and mental health and wellbeing, support recovery from illness, and aid in managing poor health.

b. People who live in greener areas live longer.[69]

c. People who are more connected to nature are happier and have higher life satisfaction compared to those less connected to nature.[70]

d. There is also a positive association between greater exposure to outdoor blue spaces and benefits to mental health and wellbeing.[71]

e. The benefits to human health and wellbeing from green spaces, especially urban green spaces, accrue through a variety of means, including the pathways covered above (reducing urban heating, air, water, light, and noise pollution, mitigating and adapting to climate change), as well as increased access to opportunity for physical activity, social connection and cohesion, and simple exposure to and connection with nature.[72]

f. As identified above, there are disparities in access to nature across England, and people exposed to poor quality environments are likely to experience worse health outcomes.

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[65] https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0272494419301185?via%3Dihub
[66] https://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/6005041314136064
[67] https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0177186
[68] https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9309726/
[69] https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/26540085/
[70] https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/25249992/
[71] https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S1438463917302699
[72] https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/904439/Improving_access_to_greenspace_2020_review.pdf

g. While all demographic groups benefit from increased access to nature, deprived groups gain the most health benefits from greener environments.[73] Socioeconomic-related inequalities in health are lower in greener communities.[74]

h. Also, there is evidence that biodiverse urban green spaces provide the highest psychological benefits for people.[75]

i. The Public Health England report 'Improving access to greenspace: A new review for 2020' provides the most up to date and comprehensive review of the evidence, linkages, and financial value of green spaces for physical and mental health.[76]

j. Delivery of maintenance, improvements, or new urban greenspaces, especially through green social prescribing, can benefit an individual's health and wellbeing, connect them to nature, and be an enabler of wider access and inclusion in a community.[77]

11. High quality urban green spaces contribute to the creation and maintenance of thriving and prosperous local places.

a. Urban green spaces can support thriving and prosperous places and communities for people, through encouraging investment and regeneration, providing green job opportunities, and promoting social cohesion.

b. High quality urban green space can help create the right settings for investment and act as a catalyst for wider regeneration. Properties closer to urban green spaces are more expensive by an average of £2500.[78] High quality green spaces and other green infrastructure (such as green walls) can help businesses build a good image and improve reputation.[79]

c. Green spaces and wider green infrastructure can also provide green jobs, from ecology to planning to gardening to construction. National Trust research

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[73] https://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/4799558023643136
[74] https://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/4799558023643136
[75] https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.02320/full
[76] https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/904439/Improving_access_to_greenspace_2020_review.pdf
[77] https://www.wildlifetrusts.org/sites/default/files/2023-07/23JUN_Health_Report_Summary_FINAL.pdf
[78] https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/environmentalaccounts/articles/urbangreenspacesraisenearbyhouseprices byanaverageof2500/2019-10-14#:~:text=Public%20green%20space%20boosts%20the,expensive%20than%20those%20further%20away.
[79] https://www.greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk/media/4140/ignition-fact-files-urban-green-spaces-and-business-final.pdf

demonstrated that a £5.5 billion investment in urban green spaces and infrastructure would create 40,000 jobs and over 6,000 permanent jobs.[80]

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?

12. Existing Government initiatives are not sufficient to adequately address the issues associated with a lack of urban green space.
    a. Existing funding pots, including the Levelling Up Parks Fund of £9 million, (even supplemented by £30 million for the refurbishment of 30 local parks in England, as promised in the 2022 Levelling Up White Paper) and the £10 million Urban Tree Challenge Fund, fall far short of the £5.5 billion estimated by National Trust to upgrade urban green spaces in the most deprived neighbourhoods.[81]
    b. These one-off funding pots and the voluntary nature of the Green Infrastructure Framework also fail to address the fundamental barriers in the existing system to delivering more green spaces. These barriers, also outlined in response to Question 1, include: inadequate resourcing for local planning authorities and parks budgets, lack of green space requirements for developers in the context of declining quality of development, short-term and uncoordinated programmes of investment, and lack of a strategic and cross-Government direction and approach to improving green spaces.

13. It is not clear if and how existing Government initiatives will add up to achieving the Government's own commitment in the Environmental Improvement Plan to ensure all people live within a 15 minute walk of a high quality green or blue space.[82] Current Government figures show that 38% of people do not have access to nature within a 15 minute walk of home. [83] There is no published detail on how the Government plans to meet the commitment across the country, what policies and actions are needed

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[80] https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/our-cause/communities/new-research-reveals-need-for-urban-green-space
[81] https://nt.global.ssl.fastly.net/binaries/content/assets/website/national/pdf/urbangreen-infrastructure-investment-appraisal-2020-report.pdf
[82] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/environmental-improvement-plan
[83] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/environmental-improvement-plan

across Departments, local authorities, and other public bodies, and what funding is needed.

14. The recently published Natural England Green Infrastructure (GI) Framework, including principles, standards, maps, planning and design guides, and process journeys, is a welcome Government initiative. The GI Framework provides a useful set of resources for local authorities, other public bodies, and developers on why, how, and to what standard to deliver green infrastructure in new development and in existing developments. It includes multiple standards, including on provision of green space, quality of green space, and community engagement in designing and delivering green space. It also includes a standard on developing a local Green Infrastructure Strategy and setting locally-relevant targets to meet other GI standards.[84] However, the GI Framework and Standards are only voluntary. Lack of national standards or regulation is a major barrier cited by local planning officers in taking decisions and influencing the design of development, for example in the walkability of a development.[85] In addition, voluntary standards will not be effective in galvanising local authority action to retrofit existing developments to improve green spaces – generally local authorities already want to take this action, they are limited not by ambition, but by lack of funding. Instead, the GI Framework and Standards should be made mandatory.

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?

15. No, existing Government policy, initiatives, and funding will not deliver an increase in the amount of green cover to 40% in urban residential areas, as identified as a goal of the Urban Greening Factor (UGF), one of the standards in the Green Infrastructure Framework.[86]

16. It is also not clear if and how existing Government initiatives will add up to achieving the Government's commitment in the Environmental Improvement Plan to ensure all people live within a 15 minute walk of a high quality green or blue space, [87] which is

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[84] https://designatedsites.naturalengland.org.uk/GreenInfrastructure/Home.aspx
[85] https://www.sustrans.org.uk/media/10520/walkable-neighbourhoods-report.pdf
[86] https://www.gov.uk/government/news/natural-england-unveils-new-green-infrastructure-framework
[87] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/environmental-improvement-plan

also one of the standards in the Green Infrastructure Framework.[88] Current Government figures show that 38% of people do not have access to nature within a 15 minute walk of home. [89] There is no published detail on how the Government plans to meet the commitment across the country and what policies, actions and funding are needed across Departments, local authorities, and other public bodies.

17. Currently, the GI Framework and Standards, including the UGF Standard and the Accessible Green Space Standard (nature within 15 minute walk of home), are only voluntary. Developers are not required to meet the UGF Standard and the Accessible Green Space Standard when planning and delivering new development. In existing development, voluntary standards will not be effective in galvanising local authority action to retrofit existing places – as generally local authorities already want to take this action, they are limited not by ambition but by lack of long-term funding.

18. To deliver on the Government's access to nature commitment and urban greening ambition, the Government must:
    a. **Set a legally-binding target for access to nature** by putting the current Government policy commitment to provide access to high quality green and blue spaces for all people within a 15 minute walk of home on a statutory footing through the Environment Act 2021. A legally-binding target for access to nature would drive cross-Government action and investment.
    b. This must be **supported by a national strategic plan for access to nature**, to set out how the Government will deliver on its target, including policies, actions, and required funding. This strategy should recognise the importance of local government for the Government to achieve the target and provide the policy solutions and funding required to local authorities. The strategy must be cross-Government and cross-sector, recognising the multiple benefits of green infrastructure and the multiple Departments, sectors, and other stakeholders involved in planning, designing, delivering, and maintaining urban green spaces.
    c. **Require, support, and fund each local planning authority to produce, implement, and report on a local Green Infrastructure Strategy, according to the Green Infrastructure Standards.** This would involve assessing existing provision of urban green space in a local area against the GI Standards and setting locally targets to progress towards achieving the Standards in new and

[88] https://www.gov.uk/government/news/natural-england-unveils-new-green-infrastructure-framework
[89] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/environmental-improvement-plan

existing developments (including 40% green cover and 15 minute access to nature). This approach would require local authorities to take a strategic approach to improving urban green space, identifying opportunities to improve the provision and quality of urban green spaces and green routes, prioritising nature-deprived areas, in order to deliver the most benefits for local nature, people, and communities.[90] A locally-produced strategy, with a requirement for public consultation, also provides an opportunity for local communities and people to have a voice to identify what green spaces are most important to them and how they should be designed and delivered. Local planning authorities should receive additional funding to develop and implement a local GI Strategy.

d. **All public bodies should be required to contribute to the delivery of the local GI Strategy**. This will ensure key stakeholders and landowners, such as water companies and the Highways Agency, pull together with local authorities to increase access to nature.

e. **Mandate all new development meet the Green Infrastructure Standards**, including 40% green cover and 15 minute access to nature. This will set minimum legal requirements on developers to deliver urban green spaces.

f. **Pledge £5.5 billion over 5 years[91] to local authorities to level up urban green spaces.** Significant and long-term funding is needed for local authorities to deliver the improvements to quality and provision and long-term maintenance of urban green spaces. A longer-term programme of investment is also needed, making green infrastructure more akin to grey infrastructure investment. Core funding to support resource-stretched local authorities is also needed.

19. There are several additional measures that the Government should take to green urban space, including:

a. Introducing an Environmental Rights Bill, with a new human right to a healthy natural environment and access to environmental justice. This would require public authorities to act compatibly with this right, increasing the weight given to access to nature within policy-making and decision-making within central and local Government. It would also give communities new tools to protect their access to nature, through enshrining rights to environmental information, to participate in decision-making, and to access justice in UK law.

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[90] 'Improving Access to Greenspace: A new review for 2020' Public Health England
[91] https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/our-cause/communities/new-research-reveals-need-for-urban-green-space

b. Embedding ambitious public access options with ELM schemes, enabled by a significant increase in ELM funding. This would incentivise farmers and land managers to improve and create more public access to nature and to the countryside. Means of doing this include improving existing public rights of way through additional waymarking or replacing stiles with gates or gaps to increase usability for disabled people, and making new permanent links between existing public rights of way and creating many miles of new paths.

c. Strengthening monitoring, reporting, and enforcement of onsite delivery of Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG). Done well, BNG will mean development must contribute to nature's recovery, rather than hindering it, and onsite delivery of habitat creation or enhancements could have significant co-benefits for people's access to nature. The delay in the commencement of mandatory BNG to January 2024 is regrettable, creating uncertainty in the development of an important new market for nature, but the Government should use the time to clarify rules for BNG implementation, in particular onsite delivery. The Government should set out clear plans for adding on-site BNG to the register (currently, only off-site BNG units will be registered) so that long-term gains can be effectively managed and monitored on site, and that this information is publicly available. Where developers fail to deliver and maintain promised gains, there must be enforcement, but this burden will fall largely on local planning authorities (LPAs), particularly where on-site gains are secured through planning conditions or obligations. LPAs have limited funds for enforcing planning conditions, with 80% of enforcement officers already reporting that there were not enough officers in their team to carry out the workload.[92] While the recent £9 million of funding from Government to support LPAs to recruit ecologists is welcome, this is not sufficient. Further investment and guidance are needed to enable and empower LPAs to monitor and enforce the delivery of BNG.

d. Setting out updated guidance for LPAs to take account of Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRSs) in plan-making. A new Government amendment to the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill has resulted in a welcome strengthening of the legal link between LNRSs and the planning system, but the Government must now publish robust and clear updated guidance setting out how LPAs must ensure the biodiversity priorities and mapping from LNRSs are factored into local plan-making and site allocation decisions.

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[92] https://www.alge.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/15/2022/06/ALGE-ADEPT-Report-on-LPAs-and-BNG-2022.pdf

e. Protecting and expanding the public rights of way network, including removing the 2026 cut-off date for registering historic rights of way.
f. Extending public access rights to waterways, woodland, riversides, and grasslands.
g. Creating a more equal and inclusive freedom to enjoy land and water for other user groups, such as cyclists, horse riders, cavers, swimmers, paddlers, and disabled people.

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?

20. No, access to urban green spaces is not equally distributed. There are vast disparities in the quantity, quality, and access to urban greenspaces in England, along lines of socioeconomic status, ethnicity, disability, and region. Please see our response to Question 1 for further detail and evidence of the access to nature gaps.

21. The barriers to access to urban green spaces are both physical and sociocultural. The barriers are summarised well in the Groundwork UK 2021 report 'Out of Bounds: Equity in Access to Urban Nature.'[93]
    a. Lack of provision of urban green spaces, especially local green spaces, is a barrier to people accessing the space and its benefits. As highlighted in our response to Question 1, people who are poorer, people from ethnic minority groups, and disabled people are more likely to live in a neighbourhood with no green spaces nearby.
    b. There are also physical barriers to accessing existing urban green spaces, especially for disabled people and people with reduced mobility, such as inaccessible transport, steps, slopes, inaccessible gates or barriers, lack of toilet facilities, and lack of pre-visit information and accessible on-site signage to ensure people are able to plan in advance and navigate their visit to a green space.[94, 95]
    c. People who are not used to visiting green spaces may be less confident in accessing green spaces. There is evidence that the presence or absence of

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[93] https://www.groundwork.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Out-of-Bounds-equity-in-access-to-urban-nature.pdf
[94] https://doi.org/10.16993/sjdr.50
[95] https://www.sensorytrust.org.uk/resources/guidance/inclusive-greenspace

positive childhood memories associated with green spaces had a significant influence on their use in adulthood.[96]

d. Girls and young women often report feeling unsafe when spending time in public spaces such as parks and green spaces.[97] The design of green spaces, often geared towards boys and young men, can make them less appealing to girls and young women.[98]

e. The perception that green spaces are dominated by white people and the experience of racism in these spaces can prevent people from ethnic minority backgrounds from using green spaces.[99]

f. There is also evidence that the design of urban green spaces can be improved to make them more relevant and appealing to a broad range of people, including people from different ethnic backgrounds.[100]

g. Cuts to park budgets may impact the quality of urban green spaces and the presence of on-site staff, contributing to the barriers identified above, and making these spaces less accessible and welcoming to all people.

22. To address the inequalities in access to urban green spaces, solutions must tackle provision, physical and sociocultural barriers.

a. The presence of park staff, the involvement of diverse communities in planning, and inclusive community events are commonly identified as ways of building confidence among people who feel or are excluded from urban green spaces.[101]

b. In-depth consultation with users and potential users of urban green space is essential to developing and managing urban green spaces that meet the needs of all people.[102] In our view, this engagement with local communities and people should be initiated by local authorities when developing their local Green Infrastructure Strategy.

c. Crucially, addressing barriers to accessing urban green spaces and conducting in-depth consultation with local people to ensure accessibility and inclusivity of urban green spaces will require increased capacity and resources within

[96] https://iwun.sites.sheffield.ac.uk/research/work-package-2-cultures-and-values-of-nature-and-health-and-wellbeing

[97] https://www.girlguiding.org.uk/girls-making-change/girls-attitudes-survey/

[98] https://www.makespaceforgirls.co.uk/research

[99] https://theecologist.org/2019/oct/10/black-absence-green-spaces

[100] https://www.forestresearch.gov.uk/documents/1395/FR290807_RESFinalReport.pdf

[101] https://www.groundwork.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Out-of-Bounds-equity-in-access-to-urban-nature.pdf

[102] https://www.futureparks.org.uk/communities#communities-guidance

local authorities. As a start, the Government should pledge £5.5 billion over 5 years[103] to local authorities to level up urban green spaces. Funding should be prioritised to the most nature-deprived areas, as identified by the local Green Infrastructure Strategy. Core funding to support resource-stretched local authorities in the long-term is also needed.

d. Mandating the Green Infrastructure Standards in all new development and taking action to retrofit existing communities in line with the GI Standards will contribute to addressing inequalities, as the GI Standards include accessibility, quality, and consultation standards, including the Green Flag criteria, which provide a guide to ensuring local people from all sectors of the community are involved in decision-making and served by the green space.[104]

e. A rights-based approach, through a new human right to a healthy natural environment, including local high-quality green and blue spaces, could also help tackle existing inequalities.[105] This new right would require all public bodies, including local authorities, to recognise the right of equal access to nature and to ensure decision-making about urban green spaces includes all sectors of society.[106]

Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link) is the largest nature coalition in England, bringing together 80 organisations to use their joint voice for the protection of the natural world and animals.

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The following organisations support this Link evidence submission:
British Trust for Ornithology (BTO)
Buglife

[103] https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/our-cause/communities/new-research-reveals-need-for-urban-green-space
[104] https://designatedsites.naturalengland.org.uk/GreenInfrastructure/Home.aspx
[105] https://www.groundwork.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Out-of-Bounds-equity-in-access-to-urban-nature.pdf
[106] https://www.wcl.org.uk/environmentalrightsbill.asp

Froglife

Open Spaces Society

People's Trust for Endangered Species (PTES)

Plantlife

The Ramblers

The Wildlife Trusts

Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust (WWT)