Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Select Committee: Urban green spaces inquiry
Evidence submitted by Intelligent Health
October 2023

Background

1. Intelligent Health was founded and is led, by Dr William Bird MBE a practising GP and an honorary professor at the University of Exeter. Predominantly achieved through our flagship programme Beat the Street, Intelligent Health has engaged 1.7 million people in the UK from the most deprived communities to enable them to be more physically active, help them to connect with their place and their community and in turn, improve their wellbeing. The benefits continue well beyond the intervention, lasting at least two years and possibly longer.

2. Intelligent Health's mission is to create resilience and improve health by connecting people to each other, their communities and their environment. We do this through engagement of communities at scale, sharing knowledge of the foundations of good health, and by using data and evaluation to deliver actionable insight. The vision is simple; to transform people's health through small changes that make a big difference.

Questions

<u>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?</u>

1. Intelligent Health would argue that both government and local authorities are taking steps in the right direction to protect and increase urban green spaces, however there is still more to be done to grown quality, accessible urban green spaces. Here, we consider some of these existing measures both to protect existing and increasing urban green spaces, as well as other factors that contribute to the extent and quality of these spaces.

2. Regarding the protection of urban green spaces, it has been reported that where some powers exist to grow on this, they are often not implemented or awareness amongst local populations is low. For example, existing measures through the National Planning Policy Framework allow for local authorities to ring-fence green spaces from development.[1] The NPPF itself provides protection for recreation grounds, community gardens, fields and play parks (this level of protection is the same as is awarded to Green Belt and National Parks). This was initially introduced during the coalition government, but as recently as last year, the countryside charity CPRE noted that the rule was "little-known yet hugely powerful" and "curiously unknown."[2] A consequence of this lack of awareness, or indeed implementation, is that the areas most in need of green space, i.e. in urban areas, higher deprivation and ethnically diverse communities, is that they are also least likely to have benefitted from this rule. Instead, fringes of rural villages are more likely to have received a designation under this NPPF rule. Therefore, to better protect existing urban green spaces, we would argue that the government should work with local authorities to consider a marketing campaign raising awareness of the NPFF measures and the impact of this from future development.

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[1] https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1182995/NPPF_Sept_23.pdf

[2] https://www.theplanner.co.uk/2022/02/07/little-known-rule-should-be-used-protect-local-green-spaces#:~:text=local%20green%20space%20designation%20is,in%20what%20gets%20built%20locally.

3. Further, we believe that this stewardship also goes beyond the government and local authorities, as often the greatest threat to use of urban green spaces is related to the risk of crime. Globally it is well-acknowledged that social inequality and higher incidences of crime correlate, but less is known about having more green space in an urban area and how this can actually be a positive indicator to reduced violent and property crime risk (however, no change is reported in sexual crimes).[3] This difficult relationship between crime and green spaces can also trend in the opposite way, as successive studies point to users fear of crime and perceived risk when using urban green spaces.[4] Consequentially, one could argue that perceived safety is an important factor in protecting urban green spaces, thus, encouraging greater service use. This is particularly the case for women. In 2021, the University of Newcastle conducted a study into 'Safer Parks,' which conclusively found that 80 per cent of women surveyed felt unsafe in parks.[5] This perceived lack of safety means that a lot of women are deterred from using urban green spaces and also highlights why the communities we are looking to serve should be consulted with to decide if any intervention is required. As a result, Northumbria Police and Crime Commissioner, Kim McGuinness, pledged £2 million in funding to make public spaces safer. Women need to feel that these spaces are places for them, greater use of urban green spaces feeds into the protection of these places as somewhere that is disused and unloved is more likely to fall into disrepair and not be regarded as a treasured place that needs protecting. Whilst recognising the difficult nature of policing urban parks in relation to surveillance and how vegetation can impede this, we believe there is an onus on the police to also protect these urban green spaces and the government must commit to ensuring funding that enables more police patrols. Furthermore, good lighting, layout and maintenance are also important factors in making these places more inviting, it is these measures in urban green spaces to make them accessible for everyone.

4. Currently, one third of the population does not have access to quality green and blue space within 15 minutes of their home.[6] We must always include green and blue space in this context as both are equitable natural sources when exposed to can support boosted mental health and wellbeing.[7] Earlier this year, alongside the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Natural England launched the Green Infrastructure Framework (GIF) which identifies where green space is most needed. This commitment signalled that government is taking a considered approach towards increasing the amount of quality green spaces in the most in need areas. This was a welcomed announcement, as in practice it should go some way to help increase the amount of green cover to 40 per cent in urban residential areas. Despite a current move away from a lot of green policy priorities, we would urge the government to continue this commitment to increasing green spaces (no matter how small) across the most in-need urban areas.

<u>What environmental challenges are urban areas facing, and how could wider access and inclusion to green spaces (including dog-friendly spaces) address these challenges?</u>

[3] https://www.ed.ac.uk/news/2022/green-spaces-in-cities-linked-to-crime-risk-a-stud
[4] https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S1618866713001350
[5] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-tyne-63118102
[6] https://theconversation.com/plan-will-put-everyone-in-england-within-15-minutes-of-green-space-but-what-matters-is-justice-not-distance-198938
[7] https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/our-work/research/nature-how-connecting-nature-benefits-our-mental-health

5. In this paragraph we consider air pollution and the associated health implications as an environmental challenge faced by urban areas. Government acknowledges that some members of society are more affected by air pollution than others, of course, this mostly involves those living in a polluted area which we know is primarily located within expansive urban areas. These individuals are exposed to poor air quality more frequently and for longer periods than those living outside of polluted areas or are more susceptible to health problems caused by and associated with air pollution, namely older people, children, those living with CVD or respiratory disease, pregnant women, low-income communities and those living in pockets of higher pollution such as next to busy roads.[8] This is due to a lot of resulting comorbidities, such as those of low-income being more likely to live with a life-limiting condition and less access to healthy environments, including lifestyle and green spaces which contribute to reduced health outcomes.[9]

6. We would argue that it is those more susceptible to health problems related to poor air quality, that would benefit most from access to green and blue spaces in an urban setting. Of 10 places in Europe, Blackpool places third in the list of highest mortalities related to a lack of green space, with the same report concluding that almost 43,000 premature deaths in Europe could be prevented annually if urban green spaces were increased.[10] Not only are there associated health benefits to spending time in nature, but of course, forestry and vegetation primarily through tree planting actively tackles air pollution through the process of photosynthesis removing harmful levels of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. We also acknowledge, however, that it is not just CO_2 contributing to air pollution in urban areas and particulate matter is increasingly becoming a focus in tackling air pollution. In 2018, a study conducted across Bradford found that 38 per cent of childhood asthma is attributable to polluted air, specifically from nitrogen oxides (primarily from traffic-related pollution).[11] Of course, these particular cases would be entirely preventable had these children lived in an area with better air quality.

7. Considering this, we would argue that by improving access to green spaces in urban areas, particularly those with the highest levels of air pollution, for those from in-need communities will go some way in also improving air pollutants for a plethora of reasons. This is including, but not limited to: more pollutants removed from the air where more vegetation is planted and decreased road traffic where green spaces are used for active travel, making walking, wheeling and cycling more inviting. However, what again must be noted here is whether these specific communities feel any sense of belonging to these green spaces. For example, 40 per cent of those from an ethnically diverse community live in the most green space deprived areas (compared to 14 per cent of the white population), 46 per cent of those with an annual household income of under £15,000 live within a five minute walk to a green space, compared to 70 per cent of those with an annual household income of over £35,000.[12] Inequality is also witnessed across visit data, where larger proportions of infrequent visitors are amongst older people, lower socio-economic groups and ethnically diverse communities (69 per cent of

[8] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/health-matters-air-pollution/health-matters-air-pollution#:~:text=Air%20pollution%20and%20health%20inequalities,problems%20caused%20by%20air%20pollution.
[9] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/health-matters-air-pollution/health-matters-air-pollution#:~:text=Air%20pollution%20and%20health%20inequalities,problems%20caused%20by%20air%20pollution.
[10] https://ellipse.prbb.org/lack-of-green-spaces-in-cities-higher-mortality-and-worse-child-development/
[11] https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2046043018300546
[12] https://theaws.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Access-to-urban-green-space.pdf

white people visited a natural space once per weeks compared to 41 per cent of Black and 38 per cent of Asian heritage respectively.)[13] Clearly, this indicates that even where green space is available, belonging amongst certain communities is low and the government must focus on determining exactly why these communities do not make use of these spaces, and consult with them to determine ways to make urban green space more attractive to their needs.

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?

8. Intelligent Health believes that funding is only part of the overall picture to adequately address the issues associated with a lack of green space in towns and cities. Whilst funds are welcomed, a key part of addressing these issues is through changing practice. In recent years (2009 to 2021), new housing developments have brought with them a considerable reduction in the total amount of green space within a 1km radius from developments that predate them.[14] Most people will recognise that we are currently living in a housing crisis, with demand massively outstripping demand, meaning more homes need to be built. We would argue that this does not need to be at the expense of quality urban green space, which is why the introduction of the Green Infrastructure Framework was championed. Further, we believe there is also a role for behaviour change here. To supplement these welcome initiatives, government must also implement a social marketing campaign that consults with and encourages communities who are least likely to visit green and blue spaces to use them too.

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?

9. Taking into account the current political agenda, we are not quite sure if the government will achieve its aims to increase the amount of green cover to 40 per cent in urban residential areas. Real change requires a whole-system effort. Throughout this response we have offered measures that we believe the government could take to protect and increase urban green spaces, such as marketing campaigns around community power to protect these places and improved safety. In the below paragraphs we discuss additional low-cost models to increase green over in urban areas, of which we are actively advocating for.

10. If the government seeks to be truly aspirational in increasing green cover in urban residential areas, it could take inspiration from the ideals of the National Forest Company. All Local Plans which cover the Forest area (parts of Derbyshire, Leicestershire and Staffordshire) are expected to contribute towards the creation of the Forest, which is then required under paragraph 141 of the NPFF. This underwrites compliance with the National Forest Company's Guide for Developer and Planners, requiring residential development over half a hectare and commercial development over one hectare to include a minimum of 20 per cent of land mass to be green infrastructure. For any development over 10 hectares, 30 per cent of the site must

[13] Ibid.

[14] https://theconversation.com/neighbourhood-green-space-is-in-rapid-decline-deepening-both-the-climate-and-mental-health-crises-183389

be dedicated to Forest green infrastructure. Where this cannot be accommodated, any shortfall should be addressed by a contribution to off-site planting of £35,000 per hectare.[15] Where 20 to 30 per cent green infrastructure is not possible in new developments, DLUHC could instead offset the planning requirement with similar tree planting initiatives.

11. Another ambition of the government should be redefining what the green belt is, with as much as one fifth of current designated green belt actually comprising of car parks, dumps and inaccessible wasteland.[16] Surprisingly, there is no requirement for green belt land to have ecological importance and much of what we would think to be brownfield actually fits within the greenbelt category, thus being restricted by planning restrictions. We believe if these specific 'wasteland' pockets of green belt should be repurposed to create new urban green spaces. If this land cannot be used for development, the sensible option should be to regreen these spaces or use them as a natural source for local urban communities. This would also be an opportunity to encourage community ownership of this land and could also be a means to promote initiatives like urban allotments, whereby volunteers could maintain upkeep and build a community around the green spaces and help with belonging.

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?

12. We discuss barriers to urban green space access in Paragraphs 5 to 7. Underrepresented communities in relation to income and ethnicity are acknowledged as groups more likely to live in urban areas bereft of quality green space. As a consequence, these communities are also most likely to live in areas of high air pollution, meaning that this is another factor (along with other comorbidities) that lead to disproportionate health risks. Intelligent Health is one of dozens of organisations that has partnered with the Wildlife and Countryside Link for its 'Nature 2030' campaign.[17] One of the five key asks as part of the campaign is a new human right to a healthy environment. With the launch of the Green Infrastructure Framework earlier this year, Natural England and in turn, Government acknowledged the health benefits of nature access. However, there remains concerns around the quality of urban green space where nature remains in a state of decline. We believe that it will be impossible to improve people's health and wellbeing without equitable access to nature and support the Wildlife and Countryside Link's call for the establishment of a human right to clean air and water and access to nature to get nature recovery back on track.

[15] https://www.nationalforest.org/sites/default/files/components/downloads/files/Planners%20Guide%202018.pdf
[16] https://www.cityam.com/redefining-what-green-belt-means-could-solve-the-housing-crisis-in-london/
[17] https://www.wcl.org.uk/assets/uploads/img/files/Nature_2030_Report_18.07.2023.pdf