HOUSE OF COMMONS

Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Urban green spaces, HC 164

Tuesday 5 December 2023

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Sir Robert Goodwill (Chair); Ian Byrne; Dr Neil Hudson; Cat Smith; Derek Thomas.

Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee member also present: Mr Clive Betts.

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Witnesses

I: Professor Prashant Kumar, University of Surrey; Mathew Frith, Director of Policy and Research, London Wildlife Trust; Dr Mark Gush, Head of Environmental Horticulture, Royal Horticultural Society.

II: Professor Catharine Ward Thompson, Professor of Landscape Architecture, University of Edinburgh; Graham Duxbury, Chief Executive, Groundwork; Dr Elaine Mulcahy, Director, UK Health Alliance on Climate Change.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Professor Prashant Kumar, Mathew Frith and Dr Mark Gush.

Q1 **Chair:** Welcome to this session of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Select Committee, which is our first evidence session in our urban green spaces inquiry. We have often been very rural-based and we do have members of the Committee who are not as rural as others, so this is looking at urban green spaces and what we can do there.

We are very pleased indeed to have Clive Betts, who chairs the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Select Committee and is guesting with us today. We are look forward to your expertise. We have two sessions. I will ask witnesses in the first session to introduce themselves, starting with Professor Kumar.

Professor Kumar: My name is Prashant Kumar. I am a professor and chair in air quality and health. I am also the founding director of the Global Centre for Clean Air Research and the co-director of the Institute for Sustainability at the University of Surrey. I also lead a UKRI-funded network, RECLAIM Network Plus, which is looking into making cities sustainable by implementing green and blue infrastructure within them and supporting the levelling-up agenda. The evidence that we submitted was put together by my Global Centre for Clean Air research team.

Mathew Frith: Good afternoon. My name is Mathew Frith. I am director of policy and research at London Wildlife Trust. We are the wildlife trust that operates throughout Greater London and we have a long-term interest in the conservation of nature across London’s green and blue spaces and the engagement of people in access to those spaces in order to improve their wellbeing.

Dr Gush: Hello, everyone. I am Dr Mark Gush. I am head of environmental horticulture, which is one of the research teams in the science and collections division at RHS Wisley. I am based at Wisley as well.

Q2 **Chair:** Thank you very much. If I may, I will start off the questioning with a simple one. What are the key environmental challenges affecting urban areas? Who would be the best to start with that? Shall we start with Professor Kumar? You are a professor, so you are the most qualified.

Professor Kumar: As we all know, urban areas are facing environmental and climate challenges. At the forefront of that, you can think about air pollution. If you look at the statistics, there are nearly 36,000 deaths every year in the UK, and it could cost the NHS and social services almost £1.6 billion between 2017 and 2025.

Another challenge is urban heating. If you remember the heatwaves over the last year, we had over 4,500 deaths associated with them. If the temperature goes above 25%, the evidence suggests that you could have even 50% higher mortality.

A third one that you can think of is noise. Over 40% of the population is exposed to higher noise levels, which could lead to almost 130,000 life years lost across the UK.

Apart from that, there are other challenges, which I am sure will be picked up later on, such as urban flooding, loss of biodiversity, carbon sequestration and so on. This is where green infrastructure comes into play substantially in addressing these natural hazards and environmental challenges.

Q3 **Chair:** Basically, you are saying that urban areas are quite hostile environments compared to the countryside and that we have problems with heat and pollution, etc, in effect. Turning to Mr Frith, wildlife and green areas can address that. How do you see the solutions being partly down to what we can deliver in urban areas but have not delivered before?

Mathew Frith: There is a recognition that natural green spaces, which are diverse in terms of their structure and their species, can help mitigate some of the problems already referred to, particularly in terms of the urban heat island effect. There is a 10°C difference between the centre and the extremes of London during high summer. Having more green areas within the inner city, which has been in London planning policy for the last 15 years or so, through green roofs, green walls and greening the streets where possible, has a role in combating a multiplicity of pressures on the environment in which people live, work and play.

The other pressure, of course, is the fact that many of our cities, of which London is one example, are growing very rapidly. We have about 9.6 million people living here, with a projection of 10 million by 2027 and 11 million by 2041. If we are protecting the green belt, there is greater pressure on those green spaces that we have in the city, in terms of not only development pressure but also usage and providing that amount of space for people to enjoy the benefits of good green spaces.

Compounded with that, we have pollution from light and noise, as well as air and water pollution, which has an impact, as we know, on certain species, such as bats and moths. We are also getting increasing knowledge about how a highly lit city can impact on our own wellbeing. We are, evolutionarily, nocturnal mammals and have not quite lost that, so we need to recognise that we need some darkness in our lives.

Q4 **Chair:** Dr Gush, are you part of the solution to the problem?

Dr Gush: I hope so. I am certainly trying to be, and trying to nudge and change behaviours and policy where possible. As you would probably expect, the RHS is very much in favour of utilising the full diversity of plant species that are available, moving beyond just a focus on native plants to the full range of cultivated landscape plants that are available. There are over 400,000 cultivars and species of plants available to the UK public, so there is a fantastic palette of choices there.

One of the key messages that we would like to recommend that the Committee put forward to Government is to consider that full palette of species, because there are so many benefits that can be enhanced by diversifying the number of species that are used, for example. Green infrastructure can help mitigate all these problems that have been listed by Professor Prashant and Mathew. It is really around maximising the potential of those to deliver those benefits.

As you said earlier, the urban environment is a hostile one. There is severe competition for space, and conditions are challenging for growing plants, particularly trees. For example, there may be impervious paving around trees. There may be water stress issues. There may be limited soil volume for roots to develop. There are management issues that sometimes cause damage. Those aspects all need to be taken into account. If the green infrastructure can be cared for and maintained to deliver the benefits optimally, the investment that has been put into establishing them in the first place is going to be more fully realised.

Q5 **Chair:** A lot of our green spaces in cities like London are, basically, closely cropped grass, which is not very diverse and does not seem to have an awful lot of larger mammals or birds. Are we getting the balance right in terms of having areas that people can easily access, compared to, maybe, having planting or more diverse species that will provide habitats?

Dr Gush: It is a challenge to get that balance right between access for human benefits, and benefits that particularly foster environmental diversity and support for wildlife and other ecosystem services. There is probably a middle road that can be walked there, with certain areas that are wilder and more diverse but perhaps less accessible, and others that include green infrastructure but have considerations for mobility and for open spaces where people can enjoy recreational activities.

Q6 **Chair:** In Yorkshire, we have the Yorkshire Wildlife Trust, which is fantastic. It tends to have reserves that it has either acquired or been given in legacies, etc. To what extent in London do you have reserves that you own and control, or to what extent are you working with other landowners and local authorities to deliver what you want to deliver? It is a completely different environment to the wildlife reserve just on the edge of Scarborough that you can walk around and is almost deserted most of the time.

Mathew Frith: We own only three sites. For most of the nature reserves that we manage, we do it on behalf of local authorities, private companies or other organisations. For example, we manage part of a golf course as a rich, biodiverse part of chalk grassland a stone’s throw from Charles Darwin’s house. We manage Walthamstow Wetlands in the Lea Valley, which is notionally the largest urban wetland in Europe that has been open in the last 20 years, in partnership with Thames Water and Waltham Forest Council. We manage Camley Street, right in the middle of King’s Cross, which was created through a campaign of local people and us in the early 1980s. That is now is a tranquil oasis in a massive area that has undergone regeneration.

It is a mixed bag, and that is replicated by many other organisations operating across the country. I do not think that a local authority managing the open space is the only model. We have moved quite significantly away from that. There is often a local authority working with community groups.

I fairly regularly visit Brockwell Park in the London Borough of Lambeth, where there are about five or six community groups working and doing various activities, such as wellbeing walks and food growing. The local authority is there to support them, and they have a local management committee that is represented by local groups and residents. There are various examples that are operating across the city and breaking that, dare I say, Edwardian municipal model of top-down delivery. Things have changed quite significantly.

Q7 **Chair:** That is good. Up in Yorkshire, Sheffield Council, at one point at least, seemed to be preoccupied with chopping trees down, not planting them. In terms of improving access to nature, the Government announced 34 new landscape recovery projects. How applicable are those sorts of projects to urban environments, or is this the kneejerk reaction of, "That has to be in the countryside"? To what extent can we do more to improve access on the edge of towns?

Mathew Frith: There are two examples. One on the edge of London, which is already being funded through a pilot study, is Trent Park and Enfield Chase in the north London Borough of Enfield, in the Lea Valley. It is undergoing an element of rewilding. There was another application in this round, which is in the Colne Valley in west London.

The issue is often to do with the fragmentation of land ownership. One of the things that we have not referenced so far is that land is often parcelled into much smaller units in order to achieve landscape changes and get that landowner buy-in. The example in Enfield is made easier, because that local authority owns a significant amount of farmland and has been working with its tenant farmers in that particular project, but they are much more complicated to deliver, which then begs the question: can there be more urban-specific programmes that take account of the particular challenges that we face in our towns and cities and deliver joined-up thinking?

Chair: That sounds like an early recommendation that this Committee might make.

Q8 **Ian Byrne:** Air pollution is a great worry in Liverpool West Derby, which I represent. The environmental improvement plan is looking at a 15-minute walk to the nearest green space. Could we quantify what difference that would make to air pollution and the viability of stopping so many deaths?

Professor Kumar: This 15-minute concept is becoming quite popular. We have seen some of these concepts in Europe that other cities are now adopting. The idea there is that you want to give up on motor vehicles, make cities accessible by walking and cycling, and promote active travel. While you are doing that, you are directly cutting down emissions from vehicles and reducing people’s exposure to them. That could include the elderly or children walking to school or taking a walk in the morning or the evening. It is not only reducing the concentrations coming into the air, but also cutting down direct exposure when you are very close to those vehicles.

Active travel has its own benefit in terms of health, but, at the same time, when you get access to green spaces, there are all sorts of linked benefits, starting with less stress, feeling happier, and so on. We should welcome these kinds of initiatives, which, if designed properly, could make a significant impact in terms of reducing air pollution levels in the close vicinity of those particular areas.

Q9 **Dr Hudson:** I wanted to get on to flood management and mitigation. Firstly, as an introductory question, how significant is the risk of urban flooding? How can green infrastructure contribute to our management of flood risk in urban areas?

Professor Kumar: Urban flooding is one of the major natural hazards that we are seeing under changing climate conditions. It has a substantial impact on housing but also affects people’s daily lives. Sustainable urban drainage systems—or SuDS—are one approach that is being adopted. If you put green infrastructure in place, it allows the delaying of peaks in rainfall. For example, if you suddenly have very high rainfall, the drainage system cannot cope with it, which is why you get flooding.

Q10 **Dr Hudson:** We are moving on to SuDS in the next part of the question, but, broadly, you say that green infrastructure can help.

Professor Kumar: It can help by stopping the peak flow, but also by getting the water more penetrated into the system. That could be in the form of greening at street level, as well as green roofs and so on. That can also help in an overall sense.

Q11 **Dr Hudson:** In urban areas, there is a risk of flooding if you have increased development, as well as increased asphalt and concrete. It is a balance, is it not, in terms of that? Where are we at with trying to reduce the risk from ongoing developments?

Professor Kumar: Ongoing developments usually consider normal rainfall conditions, so they do not really cope with extreme rainfall. If you do not have proper green infrastructure in place, anything that comes ends up in the drainage system, which will not cope, and then you will have the issue of flooding.

Mathew Frith: There have already been exploratory projects that started to address that in terms of redesigning parks. For example, in southern London, various projects, initially led by the Environment Agency but now taken up by local authorities and catchment partnerships, have seen the reconfiguration of parks like Ladywell Fields, Chinbrook Meadows and Sutcliffe Park, all on the River Ravensbourne, which joins the Thames at Deptford. Effectively, they are turning them into flood storage areas at times of high rainfall.

While there was an initial kickback from local communities thinking that their open space was going to be turned into a lake, they have increasingly become something that people want to see, because those rivers have been re-naturalised. They have been taken out of their concrete straitjackets, and people can see the benefits. People like looking at running water, when it is clean. Those parks have changed and are no longer green deserts. They are places that are exciting to be in.

Q12 **Dr Hudson:** Is that increasing and improving biodiversity as well there?

Mathew Frith: Yes, because those naturalised rivers are then being planted up with plants that help catch silts and pollutants. They also provide breeding habitat for reed warblers, coots, swans and things like that. We have seen that biodiversity uplift through those interventions as part and parcel of dealing with those other issues of flood management.

Q13 **Dr Hudson:** That, again, indirectly benefits people's physical and mental wellbeing when they are then encouraged to visit and enjoy those areas as well.

Mathew Frith: Over the time that I have lived in London, which is most of my life, I have witnessed how some of those parks have just become popular in the way that they were not 30 years ago.

Dr Gush: I would love to highlight the role of domestic gardens in this debate, because it is a significant area that they occupy in urban areas. Up to 30% of urban areas are estimated to be domestic garden space, so there is a really important role for domestic property owners to play in the whole flood risk alleviation process. Unfortunately, the news is not that good in terms of the paving over of front gardens. It has been getting a little bit worse.

Q14 **Dr Hudson:** That was going to be one of my follow-up questions. How big a deal is the impact of the paving over of domestic gardens? How much is it happening, what is the impact and what can we do to slow or address that?

Dr Gush: It certainly is happening. There are a number of causes of that. The average size of domestic gardens has been reducing slowly over time. Perhaps one of the unintended consequences of electric vehicles is the need to charge and then to have hardstanding paving on front gardens to facilitate the charging. If there were perhaps more kerbside facilities for charging, it would alleviate that. There is also perhaps the concept that it is easier maintenance and just not as demanding to have a paved over front garden, but there are, of course, significant hydrological consequences to the runoff from those paved areas as opposed to water that could infiltrate into a permeable surface.

Q15 **Dr Hudson:** Have there been any studies linking the increase in the paving over of domestic gardens with an increased flood risk? Have people quantified that?

Dr Gush: They have quantified that. I have a few references in my notes, which I can supply to the Committee.

Q16 **Dr Hudson:** That would be helpful. Thank you. Professor Kumar, you were talking about sustainable drainage systems. To what extent are new developments incorporating anti-flooding measures? What impact will making sustainable drainage systems compulsory in new developments have? Do we see a knock-on effect from that that will help us in the future?

Professor Kumar: Most new developments are driven by design codes. A lot of this stuff is not mandatory. It is more like, "If you want to do it, just do it". As a result, you will see that many new developments focus quite a lot on greening, but possibly not from that perspective. This is where the gap remains. These sorts of things should feed into other design codes and be enforced, such that, when new builds are being built, they look not only at SuDS but at the holistic benefits that these new spaces could get from having greening in those particular areas. This is happening, but not to the extent that they have been well thought out in terms of planning.

Q17 **Dr Hudson:** So you think more can be done. Schedule 3 of the Flood and Water Management Act 2010, to be implemented in 2024, makes SuDS mandatory in all new developments, but this represents only a small proportion of the total building stock. As a Committee, what could we recommend to Government to make things a bit stronger, so that new developments across the board are going to be mitigating flood risk moving forward? What suggestions could you make for us to put in our report?

Professor Kumar: There are two things to look for here. One is new developments. It is really good to see that these things are in the new development phase, but the problem is that this is a very small stock of new buildings. One of the things that I wanted to emphasise is whether similar things could be emphasised on existing building stock. The problem with that is that retrofitting is always difficult and a challenging task, but we need to come up with innovative ways to implement it, if you really want to make a bigger impact there.

The other thing, which is quite important when it comes to SuDS, is how well they are working in the long run. They might have been put in place when these new build structures were there, but there is not a great deal of data available to monitor or measure their success in the long term.

Q18 **Dr Hudson:** So we do not have enough data. The Government are investing over £5 billion in flood defences in England, but we need to know how well these sustainable drainage systems work compared to traditional flood defences. What you are saying is that we just do not know yet, so could more work be done to evaluate the success or otherwise of these new schemes?

Professor Kumar: SuDS is definitely the most efficient way to manage flooding, so I am not contesting that. My point is on the monitoring of the systems in the long run, where we do not have data. The amount of old building stock in the UK, for example, is big compared with new developments. If you really wanted to look at the urban area or a particular area from a holistic point of view, you would need to look for measures that could go into existing developments as well.

Q19 **Dr Hudson:** Mathew or Mark, do you have anything to add on flood protection and these new, innovative, sustainable methods?

Mathew Frith: I would not add to anything that has already been said, other than that we know what can be done and what to do. It is about the resources to make it happen. I certainly agree on the monitoring. There are a number of tools within the London plan, for example, including the urban greening factor, which has been adopted—also in Southampton—from other cities in Europe. It applies a metric in order to facilitate urban greening, and SuDS is a part of that. All that the developer has to do is achieve a particular score, but there is no monitoring once that has been installed.

Something that we have already fed into the first iteration of the London plan is that monitoring needs to be built into the urban greening factor. There is monitoring within the biodiversity net gain metric, but that is not for SuDS per se. You could design something that facilitated sustainable urban drainage to secure a biodiversity net gain. There is a 30-year management plan that has to come with every application that goes through, but that is not necessarily focused on drainage and managing flood risk.

Those are two things that we are keen to see, but it is the issue about retrofit. An issue that is of particular concern, looking at climate risk, flood risk and access to nature, is that the social housing stock in our cities, where many of those green spaces do not perform much of a function anyway, let alone for the residents who live there, is increasingly coming under pressure for infill development because it is cheaper for landlords to build on their existing stock, so to speak, than to acquire development sites elsewhere.

We would argue—and we have done a number of projects on this, such as "A Cool Place to Live" and "Natural Estates"—that reconfiguring those green spaces within social housing stock can really change how residents feel about where they live and improve the climate resilience performance of those landscapes.

There is a brilliant site in Malmö, which I visited in 2002, where a local resident had completely reconfigured the open space within the housing stock to manage surface water flooding. You had open water within two metres of people's front doors. I remember coming back from that and saying to people, "Can we imagine doing that in England?" I am not sure, but it can be done. Addressing those inequalities of access to high-quality green space and the acute climate impacts on certain types of infrastructure that people live in within our cities could achieve a number of quick wins.

Q20 **Dr Hudson:** You raise the point about resourcing in terms of when we are putting in these green spaces or putting in flood mitigation through sustainable methods. The Government have been putting forward some money through the Environment Agency. Is there a role for central Government as well as local government? Should a burden be placed on the developer as well? Do people putting in buildings need to put some of these sustainable flood mitigation projects in place?

Dr Gush: Yes, I think so—a burden on the developer and on the owner. From a retrofit perspective, there are options in terms of incorporating cultivated plants into whole house or whole building retrofits—PAS 2030, PAS 2035 and PAS 2038. If there was a move to incorporate cultivated plants in those retrofits, it would emphasise the role that green infrastructure can play in gardens. If you select the right tree for the right place, it can be really thirsty and help draw water out of the soil in anticipation of rainfall events, so you have more water-holding capacity in the soil. It is all reliant on the size and leaf area of the canopy, because that is your driving mechanism for transpiration.

There are so many other interventions that both developers and homeowners can make. For example, going beyond just water butts, which are a standard recommendation, things like rain gardens and SuDS planters attenuate more intense rainfall events, as well as the beneficial use of plants in the right place.

It boils down to four main considerations in terms of flood mitigation. The first is slowing the flow. The next is collecting the rain. The third is enhancing soil health to improve the retention and the sustained drainage from soils. The fourth is around selecting the right plant for the right place.

Dr Hudson: That is a very helpful summary and reminds us of the fact that we have just published our soil health report today and of the importance of soil in terms of flood mitigation in both rural and urban areas.

Chair: It is World Soil Day today as well, which most people do not know.

Dr Hudson: They do now.

Q21 **Derek Thomas:** Can I just pick up on what Dr Neil was saying? I visited

Kidbrooke Village, whose development the Wildlife Trust is quite involved in.

Mathew Frith: We are.

Derek Thomas: There is water quite close to where people live there, and it seemed to work well. It was a really good example of how you can address big housing developments in harmony with nature. The Wildlife Trust helped it to secure the David Attenborough award. It is the only development in the country to have that, so well done. It was really excellent and really good to see. I live in Cornwall, but, if I wanted to live in an urban area, I would consider that, although there is no comparison. What is the current state of urban biodiversity in the UK? What are the major threats, other than what has been said already?

Mathew Frith: It is a question that we are asked all the time by the public, by some of our partners and by the media: "How is urban nature doing?" It is a complicated story, because some things are doing very well, some of which people do not like, such as ringneck parakeets, but also great spotted woodpeckers, dunnocks and wrens. They are doing okay in London and some of our other cities, but there is a trajectory that is going downwards, which echoes what is going on in many parts of the UK.

Some of those reasons are complex, because they are multifactored in terms of, say, nitrate pollution, phosphorus, and still the application of pesticides and herbicides across the countryside, which affects larger invertebrates at a key point in the food chain. There are issues with, dare I say, having to tolerate people in a city. Some species are very good at doing so. Others are possibly on the knife edge of surviving in some of our biggest cities. For example, ground nesting birds such as skylark and meadow pipit will possibly become extinct in London in the next 10 years.

There are other things that are doing really well. Kidbrooke is named after the brook along which red kites used to fly, and red kites are doing really well on the edges of London, as are sparrowhawks. Peregrine falcons have come in on their own accord. Hobbies are doing okay, but the one raptor that is not doing so well in London is kestrel. Again, it is another species that is declining at a national level, possibly because of those large invertebrates that have been affected in the wider countryside, but also because we are perhaps not managing our grasslands as well as we would like. Those can provide habitats for small mammals such as bank voles, weasels and shrews. It is that kind of smaller diversity that we often do not see or take account of in the management of our open spaces.

Q22 **Derek Thomas:** I have had a discussion with the RSPB about the recovery of birds of prey and what impacts that has on the small mammals that you have described, as well as much smaller bird life, which we are seeing in decline. Is there a connection? I am not suggesting for a minute that we should interfere, but, while we see these birds of prey recover quite strongly, is that having an impact on the biodiversity that we are trying to resolve?

Mathew Frith: If birds of prey are recovering, it tells you that there is enough food for them to feed on. While we are aware that certain woodland and garden species are perhaps disappearing—greenfinches have been hit by a particular disease, but chaffinches are still very common—we would argue that those raptors and birds of prey are here. Barn owls are recovering in parts of London as well. It is because that food supply is there. There is enough of an ecosystem in place to see those recover. One of the reasons why they were not doing so well in the 1970s and 1980s was the application of pesticides and the impacts on their egg production and the emergence of their chicks.

To answer your question, it is a complicated one. Of course, you now have the benefit of people's engagement in nature and of digital media being able to inform us where they see things. It is much more inclusive than it used to be. Whereas you had to be a specialist in order to identify a particular bird or plant, you can now just send us photographs saying, "What is this?" and we can go, "It is an Amazonian parrot in Brompton cemetery. It has probably been released". I am being a bit flippant there, but the public's interest in this stuff has transformed.

Q23 **Derek Thomas:** I presume that it is a positive support of biodiversity.

Mathew Frith: Yes.

Q24 **Derek Thomas:** Are you confident that biodiversity net gain will tackle the threats to urban biodiversity?

Mathew Frith: I am less confident about biodiversity net gain in inner urban areas. The principle behind it is fine. It is going to work much better in out-of-town developments, which are town extensions into low-grade arable land, for example. I am not going to touch on the issues around food security and land use for biodiversity, but bear in mind that that is how BNG seems to work quite well.

Once you get into the city centre or inner suburbs, there is less land to play around with. The biodiversity net gain is there to try to secure biodiversity uplift on the footprint of a development. A lot of development in inner cities is, basically, demolishing a building, so you have a zero baseline, and 10% uplift of zero is zero. That is where your urban greening factor comes in to go, "Put a green roof on the top or plant a SuDS on the bottom", or whatever.

Q25 **Derek Thomas:** That is a helpful comparison between urban and not so urban, or even, as you say, new garden villages and things.

Mathew Frith: The other thing is that there is a need to deliver the units offsite, which you can see is going to be quite possible in certain parts of London, where they are going to go on land that is already being used for other purposes. We worked with Thameslink 10 years ago on delivering an offset for work that it was doing in one part of London. When we started talking to the local communities at two sites, which we had collectively identified as where we could deliver these units of woodland creation, we could not deliver the units, because that part of the site was being used for the annual kite fair. There would be a big event at the bottom of the site.

Derek Thomas: That comes up later.

Mathew Frith: "This is where the joggers run. This is our dog walking area".

Q26 **Derek Thomas:** That does get picked up, so I am not going to ask that question. In response to what you have just been hinting at, which is that overdevelopment just squeezes and squeezes, even if we are trying to deliver the biodiversity net gain, why is connectivity between urban green spaces important and how can we increase that?

Professor Kumar: We have thousands of species around us, some of which might be doing well. I will give you a very good example. This morning, when I was coming here from Westminster underground station, I saw pigeons trying to find food in front of a shop. You can possibly spot them as well. I clearly saw that there is something wrong. They were not supposed to be there. They were supposed to be in their natural habitat. Biodiversity is very much spread across the city. There are areas that are very rich and green where you can see a high level of biodiversity gain, but there are lots where you do not see that.

I would like to take your focus towards a very important space in the urban area, which is streets. If you look around, the majority of places in London are streets. Look at Parliament itself. When you enter Parliament, you can hardly see any greening around it, so you might think about what the biodiversity in those particular areas might be.

These streets are places where we can bring in green infrastructure that not only allows us to alleviate a number of issues that we have been talking about, in terms of air pollution, flooding, overheating and so on, but can also help greatly with biodiversity. For example, you might want to think about what kind of greening you want to bring into the streets, whether it be hedges, green walls or trees. We have put in our evidence that it is quite important to make the right decision as to what kinds of trees you are putting in.

For example, if you have a very high street canyon and you put a lot of trees inside it, it can make things worse in terms of trapping the pollutants there. The issue is that, if you try cut those trees down, you will meet a lot of resistance. The point that Mark made earlier about the right tree in the right place is quite important, but, when we talk about biodiversity, we need to look at deprived areas that have no greenery and try to bring that greenery in. This should be part of the recommendations.

Q27 **Derek Thomas:** What I wanted to know was whether it is important that urban green spaces are connected to each other. Does that support biodiversity? Do they operate by squirrels and hedgehogs, or whatever you might find, getting across from one to the other? Is it important that we plan to connect urban green areas?

Professor Kumar: It is very important. This is exactly what I am saying. You have a very rich biodiverse area, which is a park. Suddenly, you have a very grey area with nothing in it, and then another one. There is no bridge there, so even if you wanted to connect them, as one area or one world, there is no opportunity for these species to go from one place to another.

Q28 **Derek Thomas:** So it is specifically about species being able to move from one to the other.

Mathew Frith: Some move very linearly, such as bats and hedgehogs, and some are constrained by their methods of mobility, such as flying insects. You can get a wave, in some ways, by having more fragmented spaces, as long as those spaces provide enough stepping stone habitat in terms of quantum and quality of habitat—the diversity of plants, for example—for them to feed on. You can build those stepping stones within the inner city. It becomes much more complicated for some other species where there is not enough space for them to breed and feed effectively.

Derek Thomas: Those would include deer.

Mathew Frith: Yes.

Q29 **Derek Thomas:** What we struggle with all the time is cross-Government Departments. In terms of the vision for green spaces and addressing this biodiversity challenge, how well is Defra connecting the green space strategy across Departments in Government?

Dr Gush: I may not be the best person to ask that question of, but I would like to redirect the focus to domestic gardens. As Mathew pointed out, there are different ways of biodiversity moving—terrestrial versus airborne movement. If you are really encouraging higher levels of biodiversity within domestic gardens, you have those stepping stones and the means of joining those dots and creating those networks more effectively.

Again, it depends on the species that are established. If there is the motivation or incentive for including as wide a range of species as possible in those decisions, that will be beneficial, because the biodiversity net gain metric is very focused on native plants and does not fully account for the much wider range of benefits that can be supplied by the complete palette of plant species available to the UK public.

Incorporating metrics that take account of the benefits of non-native or near-native plants in biodiversity metric 4.0 will incentivise people to use that to a greater extent. It will prolong the flowering season. It will provide alternative forms of habitat, nesting sites and food sources for biodiversity. That would be my recommendation.

Q30 **Derek Thomas:** Do DfE, DLUHC, in terms of planning, Defra, DCMS and the Department of Health all work together to resolve this problem?

Mathew Frith: If you want a short answer, no. We hosted a team from Defra only a few weeks ago, and it was really instructive. They said, "What is the one thing that we can do?" and I said, "Take account of towns and cities. Take account, in all your policies and practices, that we have biodiversity in our towns and cities". An example was the deer strategy that was consulted on last summer. There were no questions about urban deer at all. We responded on that. We have deer populations in and around London and in and around Sheffield. They are going up and up, because controlling them, dare I say, is really complicated and politically really difficult.

If we do not collectively address that and recognise that it is a potential problem, it is going to get worse. That was just one example. It is the same with the countryside stewardship schemes and higher level stewardship. They are, quite understandably, designed for rural settings.

Q31 **Derek Thomas:** On landscape recovery, which was announced last week, I have two in my constituency. I guess that none of them are in urban areas. I do not know whether any of you picked that up. I suspect not, but we have not created the environment for that. Is there anything else that you want to say about cross-Government Departments?

Professor Kumar: There are quite substantial areas in individual areas looking into, let us say, green infrastructure, health, economy, land recovery and so on. One of the challenges that I see is the integration and the holistic picture, bringing this together, and the decision-making that considers the multiple benefits of the initiatives that have been taken. This is not only a problem here but is a worldwide issue. We all love to work in silos and, whenever it comes to integration, this is where there are challenges. As soon as you bring in integration, there are lots of gains that come automatically and will solve a lot of these issues.

Chair: I am doing my bit in terms of deer control. I have two roe deer in my freezer. If we ate more venison, that would help the environment.

Q32 **Mr Betts:** I have a declaration of interests. I am a vice president of the Local Government Association, which is involved in these matters. I am also a trustee of Fields in Trust, which is an organisation that looks at the creation and preservation of urban green spaces. It will be coming to give evidence at a future session.

You mentioned the trees in Sheffield, which was an unfortunate episode as part of a roads maintenance contract, where a few trees in the city were chopped down. On the other hand, Sheffield has 4.5 million trees. It has more trees per head of population than any other city in Europe, I am told. I did not even recognise this, but it is called the tree city of the world, so we have that designation as well. I thought that I would get that on the record. By the way, I have had deer in my back garden recently, so that is the way that they are encroaching.

Coming back to the issues that I am supposed to be addressing, the issue of climate change is clearly a very important one that we are all looking at. You have partly addressed these issues already, but are green urban spaces important for mitigation against climate change and trying to deal with the issue?

Professor Kumar: This is where we started, talking about having green infrastructure for mitigating or addressing environmental challenges such as air pollution, noise, overheating, biodiversity and so on. We also need to look at natural hazards, which are being triggered more often than earlier, because of climate change. For example, last summer we saw temperatures above 40°. We have a network of sensors in Guildford, and we noted that the city centre was, at peak times, 13°C hotter than the woodland area around it. It clearly shows the importance of integrating green infrastructure into the city's fabric and how it can help not only with temperature and health, but also with energy consumption during that time, which also has a knock-on impact on climate change in terms of carbon emissions and so on.

Dr Gush: I would concur with that. The Met Office predicts hotter, dryer summers, warmer, wetter winters, and more extreme events. Heatwaves and more intense rainfall are going to become more prevalent in the future. Plants have an amazing ability to mitigate those threats. They intercept rainfall before it even hits the ground. They extract significant quantities of water from the soil to free up soil moisture storage, as I said earlier. The root networks infiltrate into the soil and improve drainage, so you are increasing the ability of your soil to absorb intense rainfall events and percolate that down into the groundwater.

There are all the cooling effects. Transpirational cooling draws energy from the surrounding atmosphere to transform water from a liquid state to a vapour state, which cools the atmosphere through that evaporative process. Then, of course, there is also the shading potential of plants and trees that contributes to the cooling. All of those really important ecosystem services that plants deliver are such a strong motivation for parks and gardens.

Mathew Frith: That is also recognised in picking up on one of the interdepartmental gaps. DLUHC sponsors the green flag award, which is the national benchmark for parks and open spaces management. Its criteria have changed over the last five or six years, where climate change adaptation is now something that judges look at—and I am a green flag award judge—when they go around an urban space to see what measures are being put in place, such as increased shading, a SuDS being put in, or a green roof on the café or storage shed. There are also places that people can shade under during particular periods of hot weather.

There are mechanisms in place. Site managers and park managers are increasingly aware of how they might have to change their management practices to take account of climate change.

Q33 **Mr Betts:** In terms of CO2 emissions and nitrate, are green open spaces in urban areas important in addressing those particular concerns?

Professor Kumar: As we all know, green infrastructure is a sink for carbon dioxide. It absorbs it as part of the photosynthesis process. If you look at studies, nitrogen oxides do not really eat up the gases. What happens in most cases is that, if there are particles, they are deposited on surfaces, but there is very little uptake of the gases. They could help improve the dispersal conditions by creating turbulence, so that concentrations are diluted.

If you install green infrastructure at hotspot locations such as the roadside, it can make a huge difference by working as a barrier between the source, which would be vehicles, and the receptor, which would be the people. You will see a lot of gains there.

From a holistic point of view, if you think about filling the whole of London with trees and how much that would reduce NOx pollution, the difference would be negligible. If you strategically put that green infrastructure around the source locations, it could reduce the exposure by more than half, which is a significant impact.

Mathew Frith: I would concur.

Dr Gush: That aspect is just one of a multiplicity of beneficial roles that plants, green spaces and parks play. It is important to not put a particular service in isolation, but to think of it in terms of a collective benefit from carbon capture, cooling, water mitigation and biodiversity support. Collectively, plants contribute all of those services. When you consider an engineering solution, it is generally focused on just one aspect, but plants have that benefit of delivering all of those services.

Mathew Frith: Just to carry that on, the other issue is that park managers are now increasingly aware of having to move towards net zero. There are a whole load of complicated measures in terms of the machinery, the methods they use in management and the arisings from management. What do they do with trees that are felled for habitat or other reasons? Do you let them rot? Of course you do, for biodiversity reasons, but they are still releasing carbon dioxide into the air. Do you burn them? That releases carbon dioxide into the air even more quickly, but it does reduce the amount of stuff that you are building up on your site.

There are some real practical complexities. Do you then remove them from site and find somewhere else in the city to store them or to let them compost? That adds to your cost and to the complexity, but there is an understanding that we need to go down that road.

There is also confusion in that, when you are talking about sequestration of carbon, peatlands and salt marshes tend to be the key habitats, as well as woodland creation, but there is not a lot of space to do that in our cities. We do have peatlands in London, for example, but they are probably about 10 times the size of this room in total. They are not going to answer that issue. It is about getting every site manager to recognise that we need to move to slightly different ways of managing our green spaces.

Q34 **Mr Betts:** How effectively is Government policy and strategy recognising the importance of climate change in maintaining, promoting and stopping the degradation of green spaces in cities and towns?

Mathew Frith: It is not as high as it could be. As a driver, it is not pushing climate change and carbon reduction as key issues to address. This is probably going to come up in another session, but it is down to resources.

Professor Kumar: The Government's net zero policy has the ambition of achieving some of those goals, but there are challenges in terms of how well those plans will be implemented and, at the same time, if you are talking about green infrastructure in particular, how it can contribute to that agenda. There is a wealth of knowledge. Natural England provided a fantastic framework, where you can see a lot of this information. At the same time, there is also a knowledge gap in terms of the very particular designs.

I mentioned the issue of streets, which are very complex environments, and you will not see a lot of this coming there. At the same time, the people are the ones who make a big difference. A lot of these policies do not take into account the contribution by the public towards this bigger agenda. This is where there is a shortfall. There should be some clear guidance put on Government websites so that individuals could also take some action to contribute to this net zero agenda.

Mathew Frith: One other issue that I wanted to touch on is skills. I was at a meeting this morning, where there has been an audit of skills in the green space sector within London in terms of meeting some of the mayoral targets. We all know that there is an increasing skills gap, in terms of not only managing open spaces to meet a multiplicity of benefits, but recognising that it is not a low-grade, unskilled, manual job and that it is a much more complex series of skillsets that we need, whether it is engaging with people, marketing, operating and understanding the trajectory towards net zero, etc. That is not being captured, because the status of those roles in much of our land management sector is just not high enough.

Mr Betts: We found certain of those challenges when we looked, from the LUHC Committee's point of view, into parks a few years ago and saw that skills among parks managers, particularly the exchange of information between them, could have been helped more by

Government, but I am not sure how much progress we have made there.

Q35 **Ian Byrne:** This is a question that I find fascinating, given that I play both golf and football. We have heard that urban green space is highly managed and that some lacks natural features such as trees and may be inaccessible—for example, sports pitches and golf courses. How can we promote biodiverse multifunctional green spaces that provide greater ecological value but also retain the health aspects of the green space that we are talking about, such as football, golf or other green space elements?

Dr Gush: Covid-19 was an example of the importance of green spaces. It was a lifeline for people to be able to get out into those green spaces. There is quantified evidence of the benefits to people in terms of alleviation of stress and recovery from trauma. There are good, quantified studies on the wellbeing benefits of green spaces, so there is good evidence on that.

Mathew Frith: I do not think that any of us who work in parks and open spaces have a, dare I say, fundamentalist approach, such that it has to be all biodiverse or all sport and recreation. We just need to recognise that our spaces need to work harder.

Ian Byrne: We need to recognise their importance.

Mathew Frith: Yes, they meet a range of different needs for society: absolutely golf, football, picnicking, flying a kite or walking your dog, etc, but there have to be balances.

Professor Kumar: As colleagues have said, health and wellbeing are quite important in terms of the benefits that you get from urban green spaces. There are studies that have quantified those impacts. Going beyond that, there have been links with less crime and with people feeling happier. When you have access to green spaces and active travel, it brings benefits to people. For example, I often like to go to the park and spend time there. If I did not have access to that, I would not be able to. I could see what difference it would make to an individual when they have access to those things.

The biggest challenge here is whether the space is accessible to people. The Natural England framework mentions accessibility issues in terms of 15 minutes, 20 minutes and so on. If green spaces are not accessible to a majority of the public, we are not exploiting their proper benefits.

Q36 **Ian Byrne:** I could not agree more. As someone who lived in a terraced house in Anfield, green space in Stanley Park was fundamental. Clive touched on Fields in Trust, which Liverpool City Council has been working with to protect 100 green spaces. We negotiated that in 2017 with the former mayor and the much missed Chrissie Byrne. Is that a model that could be utilised from a council perspective? You touched on the pressures that councils are under. The idea was to take it out of the hands of the council and protect it forever for the community. Is that a model?

Mathew Frith: There are many models that are being explored. One that was being championed 10 or 15 years ago was the Milton Keynes Parks Trust, which was established when the town was created in the 1960s. Newcastle city has taken a model that puts the parks and open spaces into a community trust model, in which the local authority does not lose democratic oversight.

Ian Byrne: That is key.

Mathew Frith: It is absolutely key. It is "not one size fits all", because every metropolis, town and city will have a different context. It is about exploring those models and promoting those that work.

Ian Byrne: It is about protecting that green space.

Mathew Frith: NGOs like Fields in Trust can access funding that local authorities cannot, for example.

Q37 **Ian Byrne:** That is a good answer. Going back to the advantages and disadvantages of urban rewilding, is this something that the Government should support? We have seen examples in Derbyshire—I am going back to golf—with Allestree Park and the rewilding of the golf course. That is massively popular locally, though maybe not with the golfers. Is rewilding green spaces something that the Government should be looking at?

Mathew Frith: It all comes down to the definition of rewilding. I served on the London Rewilding Taskforce. That took a very broad definition. It included putting fantastic wildflowers, wherever they come from, on your balcony, on your windowsill, in your garden if you have one, along the street, in your park and in your school grounds. We are now hearing about beavers being introduced into Ealing and things like that. It is about the definition. We think there are key fundamentals. It cannot be, in towns and cities, to the exclusion of people. Take the one in Derby as an example.

Q38 **Ian Byrne:** Rewilding can entail all different sorts of things. In Liverpool, they are looking at rewilding some of the edges of the road with Scouse Flowerhouse and creating natural pathways of flowers. That is something you would support.

Mathew Frith: I would, absolutely. I know it is not Liverpool per se, but Knowsley was the wildflower borough.

Ian Byrne: It was indeed, yes.

Mathew Frith: It did some fantastic stuff in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. In some ways, it showed how other local authorities could have taken things, but it got lost in the mix.

Q39 **Ian Byrne:** From a biodiversity point of view, the utilisation of these green spaces, which are seen as potential grot spots, could be absolutely game-changing, could it not?

Dr Gush: Absolutely, yes. As I said earlier, there are multiple benefits from that. It is not just about rewilding in the broadest definition of the term and encouraging wildlife into those spaces. For example, there can be savings on fertiliser or machinery use where wildflower verges are allowed to grow taller. They also compensate for higher above-ground biomass with deeper root systems. That automatically makes them more resilient to drought conditions and heatwaves because their roots penetrate deeper and access deeper groundwater reserves.

Q40 **Ian Byrne:** On that, though, as MPs, we had lots and lots of complaints about no-mow May, certainly in Liverpool. It did go on a bit longer; it went into no-mow September. Is there something here from an education perspective as well? Do we have to educate people about the value of these types of initiatives?

Dr Gush: Yes, that is exactly it. It is about behaviour change. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. If you are really looking for a tightly mown grass sward that is perfectly green, you are perhaps going to be resistant to looking at a more diverse wildflower meadow. An understanding of all the benefits it is bringing in terms of biodiversity and the support for resilience will start to change people's behaviours and minds. It is about education and behaviour change.

Q41 **Ian Byrne:** You have a job of work to do there. To finish, Professor Kumar, how can we balance the competing needs of park users, dog walkers and the environment? How do we get that balance? What is needed?

Professor Kumar: That is an interesting question. In the very first place, if you have those green spaces, you need to give everyone the opportunity to get into them. There are always competing interests from different communities, but usually, if those spaces are well maintained and accessible, I believe—

Q42 **Ian Byrne:** What about what Mathew touched on before with regard to the ownership element of it? You have certain groups and then you have a public forum. It is not top down. People feel as though it is theirs. Is that sort of ownership element something that you would recommend model-wise?

Professor Kumar: That is very important. That helps with not only maintaining those green spaces but raising a voice if something is going wrong. That is a very important aspect of ownership.

Mathew Frith: The question you also need to ask is, "Who is not using those sites?" For example, ownership can come with unintended consequences. It can come with exclusion.

We were involved in a park in Southwark. That was a modern park created in the 1970s. It had a very active "friends of" group that tended to be represented by people who lived in owner-occupied housing. The bulk of users were living on the Aylesbury Estate to the north and the

North Peckham Estate to the south. They were largely black or Asian, and they did not feel like it was their park.

The council had to intervene and not only change the measures to improve the park but ensure that the voices of those potential users were properly represented in the management decisions.

Q43 **Chair:** We will cover this in more detail in the second session. Thanks very much. Presumably no-mow May did not apply to that very sacred bit of turf at Anfield, Ian, that you are so fond of.

I just have one very last question to Mark. We have talked about health and air quality. One of the big problems in central London seems to be pollen from some of the trees. Does the RHS advise people about what they should be planting? Hay fever affects me a little bit, thankfully only when the trees are in flower. Is this something we should be thinking about in terms of what we plant in urban areas so that people are not too affected?

Dr Gush: That is very much something that should be taken into consideration. There are ecosystem services, but there are ecosystem disservices as well. Pollination and allergic reactions to certain species should be a consideration. That has been accounted for in, for example, the planting recommendations that the RHS makes, which have an awareness of some pollen allergies and disservices.

In a car park, for example, you do not want to have a tree that produces lots of really sticky fruit, which is going to fall on the vehicles that are parked underneath. Those sorts of considerations are very much relevant, yes.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed. That concludes this first session. Thank you very much indeed, gentlemen.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Graham Duxbury, Dr Elaine Mulcahy and Professor Catharine Ward Thompson.

Q44 **Chair:** Welcome back to this second session of our first evidence session on urban green spaces. We have three new witnesses. Would you like to introduce yourselves, starting with Dr Elaine Mulcahy?

Dr Mulcahy: My name is Elaine Mulcahy. I am the director of the UK Health Alliance on Climate Change.

Professor Ward Thompson: I am Catharine Ward Thompson. I am professor of landscape architecture at the University of Edinburgh. I direct OPENspace, a research centre that focuses on inclusive access to outdoor environments. I am also involved, among other research projects, in the UKPRP consortium, which is a prevention research partnership led by MRC looking at the contribution that urban green and blue space can make to reducing non-communicable disease.

Chair: I understand many happy returns of the day are in order as well.

Professor Ward Thompson: Thank you, yes.

Chair: It is not what everybody plans to do on their birthday.

Graham Duxbury: I am Graham Duxbury. I am the chief executive of Groundwork UK, the national body of the Groundwork federation, which is a network of charities helping communities to improve the quality of the local environment and their prospects at the same time. We have delivered and supported lots of projects about helping communities access, improve and manage green spaces.

Chair: As I said at the start, we are very fortunate to be joined by Clive Betts, who chairs the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Select Committee. I would like to ask Clive to kick off the questioning.

Q45 **Mr Betts:** First of all, I would like to ask you about access to green spaces. We can all value them, think they are absolutely great and enjoy them, but in different parts of the country there is a difference in how much green space is available. Sometimes the old northern industrial towns might have less than the leafy places in the south. Within cities, the suburban parts probably have more open space that people can enjoy than inner-city parts. Does this variability exist and is it an issue of concern?

Professor Ward Thompson: We know that access to, quality of, use of and the benefits from urban green space—I am talking about urban green space because that is the focus here—is unequal across the country and between different sectors of the population within our urban areas.

For example, mapping in England showed that the most affluent 20% of urban wards have five times the publicly accessible green space of the most deprived wards. That is looking at quantity, the area of green space near where you live. In addition, BAME households, which are often in the most deprived wards, have even less quantity than white households. That is the amount of green space you have around your home.

There is also proximity. How near is it? How near is the nearest usable public space to you? From a 2023 survey of England, we know that 35% do not have green space within perceived easy walking distance. A Welsh study suggested that each additional 360 meters you have to go to get to your nearest publicly accessible green space is associated with 5% higher odds of common mental disorders. That distance makes a difference.

Then there is quality. The quality is lower. The level of maintenance and the quality of green space is lower in more deprived neighbourhoods. That has been shown time and again.

Finally, there is use. Who goes into and uses those green spaces and therefore potentially benefits from them? We know that use of green space can benefit health. For some sections of the population, which includes people of lower socioeconomic status and BAME groups, having more green space around where you live, other things being equal, means you are healthier. It means there are fewer mental health prescriptions in your area, for a start.

It is what has been called equigenic. It reduces the difference between rich and poor in terms of health outcomes, if you have more accessible green space around. We know that 25% of the population do not visit their nearest green space as often as at least once a month. We know that is lower for women, older adults, lower socioeconomic status populations, those with long-term health disability or illness, and black and minority ethnic groups. That probably reflects less quantity, less quality and greater distance.

It is a very complicated picture, but it matters because having more green space near where you live can make a difference to your health—it evidently does—and reduces health inequalities.

Graham Duxbury: I cannot add a lot to the data.

Mr Betts: It is really comprehensive.

Graham Duxbury: It is, but I will answer your question by saying that it absolutely does matter. It matters fundamentally that there is a social gradient in terms of who can access and benefit from green spaces.

People from ethnic minority and low-income backgrounds are the least well-served. To some degree it is a population density issue, but there is more to it than that because there is a range of barriers that kick in to prevent people from using the spaces that do exist.

Q46 **Mr Betts:** What can we do to address this disparity, then? Does anybody have any ideas? What tools can we use? The Government have announced measures to increase access to nature. Will any of those measures help? Do we need to do something else?

Dr Mulcahy: The idea of having access to green space within 15 minutes of people's homes, for example, is a good one, providing that the space that is available is good quality and accessible.

For example, we know there is evidence of green social prescribing that can benefit people's health. It is a way of preventing ill health, helping with recovery from illness and reducing the burden on the NHS. However, one of the things we sometimes hear back from health professionals is that it is difficult to prescribe access to nature if good-quality green space is not available. Accessibility is really important.

I would also make the point—it came up in the previous session—about the need to think about green space, make use of what we have and not be restricted by thinking only of parks. There are lots of resources and existing infrastructure available that we can make accessible and make better for people so that they use it. We can address those barriers that are stopping people from using it.

Q47 **Mr Betts:** We will come on to health inequalities in a later question, but I want to mention one thing that might be done. This is just a suggestion, and I do not know whether you have looked at it.

When the Government give guidelines to local authorities about doing their local plans in the National Planning Policy Framework, a lot of the emphasis has been around how many houses we are building, but the people who are going to live in those houses will also need green space. Should there be some clear guidelines in the NPPF indicating the amount of space there should be and, particularly when new homes are built, that there is green space in the area for people to enjoy?

Professor Ward Thompson: Natural England has suggested a green infrastructure framework, which we would certainly support. Doorstep accessible green space or local accessible green space is green space that is within 200 to 300 metres of home. We know that is about five to 10 minutes' walk for most people who are ambulant.

Anything beyond that is unlikely to be used often. That five to 10-minute walk seems to be the threshold beyond which it is much harder for children, older people and people with mobility impairment or health problems to easily get there.

You want somewhere nearby, right on your doorstep, that is about five hectares, or two hectares within 300 meters. However, you also need within the wider neighbourhood, within one to one and a half kilometres or 15-plus minutes, a larger space of 10-plus hectares that has a greater diversity of opportunities. We talked about that in the previous session. There is a variety of demands on green spaces and a variety of needs from them.

Graham Duxbury: I would endorse all of that. The other point I would make—again, it was referenced in the previous session—is about the interconnectivity between spaces. This is about having spaces on your doorstep that connect with other spaces, which then allow you on to footpaths, which then allow you to explore the countryside. This graded exploration of the natural world is really important to communities.

Chair: Thank you, Clive. Thanks again for joining us. I know you have to do some media later. Interestingly, my friends in the North York Moors National Park, who have a lot of land to go to, say that most people will not travel more than 200 meters from their car when they drive in the park. These distances probably apply equally in urban and rural settings.

Q48 **Ian Byrne:** I will direct this one to Elaine first. How can urban green spaces be made more inclusive for everyone in society?

Dr Mulcahy: That is a big question. First of all, it is about understanding why people are not using the green spaces that are available and making sure that the green spaces are there for them.

We need better integration. For example, they need to be easy to get to; they need to be accessible; and they need to have the facilities and infrastructure within them to make them useable and safe for people of all types. For example, people with disabilities may be disadvantaged if there are not the right facilities. There need to be toilets available in the vicinity so that people are able to use them.

We also need to make them safe spaces. If I can give a personal example, when the days are shorter like now, it is darker for longer in the morning and it is darker earlier in the evenings. I have experienced wanting to go for a walk in London in the morning before getting to work and getting to meetings, but it is dark at 6 am. The parks are dark. It is not possible for me to go for a walk in the park because it is really dark. It is not lit up. It is not safe. If you want to get the exercise for your health, you have to walk on the footpaths alongside a busy, polluted road.

Your choice is to feel unsafe in a dark or poorly lit park or walk on a busy road where there is lots of pollution. It is not a good choice from a health perspective.

Q49 **Ian Byrne:** Would one of your recommendations be to light parks up so people feel safer?

Dr Mulcahy: Yes, lighting parks up and making them safe.

Q50 **Ian Byrne:** The stats are unbelievable: 80% of women in the north-west feel unsafe in parks. Lighting is a huge part of that. From the point of view of the Committee’s recommendations, that would be something you would recommend.

Dr Mulcahy: Yes. It is particularly relevant in the winter. The days are short. If you work nine to five, there is no time you can get out.

Professor Ward Thompson: Lighting is an important issue, particularly in the winter. We do have to bear in mind light pollution and the challenges for biodiversity of that. Managing those two things is a challenge. We need to have places that are safe and lit. We should not feel as though we need to light everywhere in a park, but choosing key routes is important.

We did some research in a number of urban areas in England, working particularly with the most deprived communities, to look at what the barriers were. There was a range of things that will not be unfamiliar to many of us in this room, such as a fear about drug dealing; worries about racism from black and minority ethnic groups; worries about dogs, both dog fouling and dog attacks; and concerns about the lack of natural surveillance, if places were very surrounded by high walls, for example.

Vandalism, litter and graffiti put people off and make them feel unsafe. If a place is poorly maintained, it makes people feel very vulnerable. People are concerned about the lack of facilities, especially different kinds of facilities for children's and adults' activities.

There is also a failure to acknowledge local community needs. The communities had lots of things they would love to enjoy from these parks, ranging from playing cricket to having open orchards and farming via community gardens or allotments. For older people and the carers of small children, the lack of toilets is a big issue. It will restrict some people.

Q51 **Ian Byrne:** Yes, that goes right across all groups: from a disabled point of view and for everybody else.

Professor Ward Thompson: Yes. There are things that are barriers and then there are things that put people off. Those include a lack of time. People who are working over 35 hours a week, who have a low economic status and may be struggling to make ends meet, do not have much time to get out. If it is not very nearby, it is hard for them to get to. People being time poor, whether through work or family commitments, is another challenge.

On the plus side, particularly for older people, the social benefits of engaging with others outdoors is a real plus. Any intervention that brings the community or subsets of the community together and engages with them in a social way is, particularly for older people, likely to—

Q52 **Ian Byrne:** Just to drill down from a recommendation point of view, what could be done to improve this? We talked about the BAME community, the elderly and the disabled. We have talked about having what the community want within the park. We touched on that before with the last panel. What can be done from a recommendation point of view? What needs to happen?

Professor Ward Thompson: We need to be engaging with the local community, understanding their needs and, as Mathew said in the previous session, making sure that all voices within the community are heard and that it is not dominated by one group only.

We then need to support that. Usually, social interventions need some public authority support initially. It may be that the local community can then maintain a longer-term commitment to that. It does take time for people who do not regularly visit at present to give them the confidence that it is a place that is welcoming to them, so that they feel safe and they can enjoy it.

Q53 **Ian Byrne:** Sometimes local authorities miss out on opportunities when they have so many passionate people who are willing to do an awful lot for their park and are invested in it. I saw an example of that last week in Liverpool. These people just want to look after the park, but sometimes they felt as though they were not getting that connection with the local authorities and were seen as a threat.

Graham Duxbury: On that point, you do really have to find a way of resourcing good-quality community engagement. It is a function that not enough people recognise needs to be in the middle of this.

That is all about brokering all the needs of the different user groups. It is all about acting almost as a translation service between the community and the council because they speak different languages. It is all about making sure that people feel some agency and ownership about the spaces with which they feel emotionally connected. Even though they may not have any ownership, they definitely feel like these are their spaces.

Part of the answer to the access question is, yes, the systemic barriers about where these spaces are, what quality they are and whether they are lit, but there are also issues about what goes on there and the activation of these places. Again, you need people to be activating them and putting on different events that are inclusive and make people feel like these places are relevant to them and that there is a reason for them to go there.

I do not know whether you have come across it, but the Make Space for Girls campaign has done some fantastic survey work looking at who uses the facilities in parks, especially among the teenage population. More than 80% of the facilities are used 80% of the time by boys and young men. You have to find ways of designing in activities. You can do that only by resourcing community development workers, community link officers and so on.

Q54 **Dr Hudson:** I wanted to get on to the role of green spaces in helping health. Part of our role as a Select Committee is to make recommendations to Government, but we also want to shine a focus on things for the public.

If I could start with you, Catharine, you have touched on this in some of your introduction and your earlier answers. Briefly, can you give us some punchy take-home messages to highlight to the public and to Government about what health benefits urban green spaces provide for us?

Professor Ward Thompson: They are good for us at all levels: mental, physical and psychological. There is evidence on all of these. As I said before, we know it is equigenic. Other things being equal, if you have more accessible green space around where you live, rather than less, even if you are very deprived, you will have better health than your neighbours who do not.

We know that people find green space to be a place where they can chill out or relax if they are anxious. It will not solve the problems that they have economically, their family problems or whatever, but it will help them to manage and cope with them better. They can manage the challenges of their lives better with a resource that allows them to relax and to recover. There is a psychological benefit there.

There is a physical benefit. By far the most common thing people do in public green space is walk. Any walking is physiologically good for us. More is better than less, but anything is good. Particularly as we get older, even some walking is good. We are much more likely to be physically active outdoors than indoors.

Q55 **Dr Hudson:** Will it help with non-communicable diseases like obesity-related diseases, cancer and cognitive decline? Does it help with those?

Professor Ward Thompson: Yes. We have some really interesting longitudinal research looking at the life course effects. Astonishingly, in a longitudinal study of a cohort of people—this was from Scotland, but we are matching it with an English study in future—we can see that the group of people who had had access to green space in childhood showed a slower cognitive decline when they were over 70.

We could see a similar signal for the most deprived communities. Access to green space in childhood led to lower anxiety and lower depression in those aged 70-plus. We could see that signal from childhood access. Every decade near a green space throughout life led to lower anxiety in older age. This suggests that childhood access is crucial, which is not surprising. How we experience the environment in childhood makes a difference for the rest of our lives.

One of the other things it probably does is give us a different attitude to what green space can offer us. When we think about the people who do not currently visit, who do not benefit although this green space could benefit them, we cannot say, "Go back and have a different childhood", but, if we understand the importance of access throughout the life course, we will have a better understanding of the vital importance of having free access to green space from early childhood onwards.

It also seems to affect our immune system and our microbiome. You may be more expert than I on the subtleties of microbiome, gut biota and how that influences our brain, but it does.

It also affects our attitudes. "This is a place I can go". Anecdotally, we have had teenagers tell us, "When I am really fed up, when life is too hard and I cannot cope with it, there is a place I go to or which I always used to go in the woods. I can be on my own. No one tells me to go away. No one tells me to get lost. I can chill out; I can cope; I can get my head straight".

Chair: This is Elaine's specialism, is it not?

Q56 **Dr Hudson:** That is really helpful. There are physical and mental health aspects. Elaine and Graham, do you have anything to add on that in terms of selling it to Government, local councils and people?

Dr Mulcahy: There are four top-line areas in terms of health. The first is heat. The heat, rising temperatures and heatwaves that we are seeing now are having a huge impact on health. It is the elderly who are the most vulnerable and pregnant women are particularly vulnerable as well.

For example, according to the Office for National Statistics, there were 3,000 excess deaths in the five heatwave periods between June and August 2022. A huge proportion of them were of people over the age of 65. Heat is just having a really severe impact on people's health. It is causing heat stress, which is increasing risk of stroke, heart disease and these sorts of things. In pregnancy, we have seen poorer outcomes for women when the temperatures are really hot. It can be quite harmful in pregnancy.

In urban environments, the temperatures tend to increase more than they do in other areas. The *Lancet Countdown* report that came out just last week looked at global temperatures. We also specifically looked at the UK. In the UK, the average summer temperature has increased by about 1 degree over the last 30 years. Globally, the average summer temperature has increased by more like 0.3 degrees. That is because the UK is so urbanised. Those effects are really having an impact on health.

We know that access to blue and green spaces in any environment, particularly in urban environments, can provide that cooling effect. There is evidence on this from a study in Europe, which was a systematic review of areas like gardens and parks. They can reduce the temperature by about 0.8 degrees. That effect can span out, up to about a kilometre. That has a benefit for health. That is one.

I also want to mention non-communicable diseases, such as obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, some cancers and some mental disorders. All of these things are preventable. Physical activity is, in theory, an easy measure that people have to prevent ill health. Green spaces provide a great way to achieve that.

Air quality is the next one. Poor air quality is linked to respiratory infections. We are seeing a lot of that in more socioeconomically deprived communities, which are more acutely affected. We are seeing that in children. Again, it is linked to loads of different health conditions such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease and stroke. Again, green spaces help to clean up the air in urban environments.

The final one I would mention is mental health. It is a huge burden on the NHS. The cost of mental illness in the UK is estimated to be about £118 billion a year. We are seeing huge increases in younger age groups as well. 30% of cases are linked to depression; 21% are linked to anxiety. Access to green spaces and nature connectedness have huge benefits for improving mental health outcomes.

Graham Duxbury: I will defer to my expert colleagues and all the data, but I would just make one addition. Last night, I was looking at a recent study from Finland—there are studies all the time now—which suggested that visiting a green space three to four times a week reduces people's chances of using medication for a whole range of conditions.

I also read that the NHS bill for prescription medicines last year was £17 billion. A fraction of that investment into public parks and green spaces will do an awful lot of good.

Q57 **Dr Hudson:** The Government have explored—Defra has managed it—the green social prescribing programme. You touched on this in some of your earlier answers. Can you give us your thoughts on that? What is it? Has it worked? What can we do to grasp it and make it better and more wide-reaching in terms of its effects?

Graham Duxbury: I have been following with interest Defra's green social prescribing pilot, which we can definitively say has worked. There have been significant results in terms of outcomes for mental health. There have been statistically significant benefits to the mental health of the people involved. About 8,500 referrals went through that system.

The other thing that the pilot demonstrated is that you can start to scale up some of these localised initiatives as long as you have the backing of the integrated care boards and other stakeholders in the area.

One thing that is recognised throughout that work—the pilot programme referenced it as well—is that the system for green social prescribing is starting to work quite well. There are link officers employed, link workers, who are working with GPs to understand where the people coming through the surgery door might benefit from access to green spaces or connection with nature.

That is only half of the equation. The other half of the equation, clearly, is the projects, services and activities within local communities, which need to be available on a consistent basis. Those are the projects and services that do struggle for funding. They are quite often dependent on grant funding, which is often short term. They are quite often dependent on volunteers to make those services work.

In some places, this has been likened to investing in the travel agents—there are now lots of people who are able to sell the destination—but not investing in the destinations. We are not yet investing in the holidays. We have to make sure that both sides of that system come together.

Dr Mulcahy: I would just reinforce that. There are loads of really good examples of success from green social prescribing, but how they are funded and the continuation of them is really critical. It is difficult to quantify the saving.

For example, there is a Fields in Trust study saying that access to nature will reduce GP visits to the value of £111 million to the NHS a year, but it is difficult to quantify that in terms of money. This is about keeping people healthy and keeping them well, but it is also about recovery. If people do end up in hospital, it helps with and speeds up their recovery. There is evidence that people taking up hospital beds and recovery times are reduced by 20%, if there is access to nature and green space, or even a view out of a window of green space.

Q58 **Dr Hudson:** This is preventative medicine working. It is very difficult to quantify which pocket of money it would come out of, if it is alleviating NHS funding later on.

Catharine, if this is a good thing—and I think we are all agreed that it is—do you have any recommendations for Government as to how it could be rolled out and how you could allocate the funding fairly?

Professor Ward Thompson: I would really just reiterate what Graham has said. We know that it seems to work. The pilots are successful. Anecdotally, from my local research in Edinburgh, I know of examples where it has worked very well. The challenge is the longer term. Turning around people's lives and behaviours, and ensuring that they get the benefits from visiting green space, need to be long-term things. There can be short-term benefits as well—this is not to deny those—but ideally these become longer-term benefits in their life.

Short-term social prescribing done by a GP might be the start of a trajectory, but you want other activities to be animated in local green spaces with the local community and with third-sector organisations supporting things socially to allow that to become a habit that is longer term and that maintains and supports better health over years, not just months.

Q59 **Dr Hudson:** This was a scheme managed through Defra in England. You have said you have been monitoring things locally. Did the Scottish Government fund an equivalent programme?

Professor Ward Thompson: I simply cannot tell you the answer to that, honestly. I would need to check that. There is a group of local GPs. NHS Lothian is working on doing social prescribing at a more local level.

Q60 **Dr Hudson:** It is people taking it into their own hands at a local level through a GP group or whatever, with volunteer groups as well.

Professor Ward Thompson: Yes.

Q61 **Dr Hudson:** The pilot has opened up the prospect that this is a good thing that perhaps should be rolled out. There is a role at the centre, a role locally and a role for GP practices.

Professor Ward Thompson: It is partly about supporting the delivery. Particularly for people who do not have a habit of regularly visiting green space already, we know that social facilitation is really important. There are often brilliant local organisations that can do this, but they need money. They are working on a shoestring. If those organisations or groups are not there to make it easy and to support it, it is hard to maintain longer term.

Q62 **Dr Hudson:** That is really helpful. Can I just come back to your point about climate and the environment, Elaine? You were talking about how the temperature differential is so important in urban areas. We know there are not a lot of green spaces in urban areas. Do we have any feel for what amount of green space we need in towns and cities to help with the climate agenda you have been talking about?

Dr Mulcahy: I do not. I do not have a measurement of how much green space we need.

Dr Hudson: If something comes up and you are aware of research that you could write to the Committee about, that would be helpful. I will hand back now.

Q63 **Chair:** We do like data and evidence rather than opinions on this Committee. Politicians are very good at opinions but not necessarily very good at evidence.

Elaine, are there any recommendations that this Committee could bring forward to try to improve the situation from a health point of view? We have heard about rolling out some of these pilots more widely. Are there any other recommendations that might be appropriate?

Dr Mulcahy: Just going back to the green social prescribing element of it, we need to try to join things up a bit better. For example, the nature recovery plans need to be joined up with the green infrastructure plans that all NHS trusts are having to produce through their green plans. We need to join these things up and work together in terms of enabling access to the green space and social prescribing. That would be a good recommendation.

Chair: Cat, you are going to talk about Party in the Park.

Q64 **Cat Smith:** Yes, absolutely. We have already touched on the fact that local government is under a lot of pressure. It has been reported that local parks have lost £690 million from Government funding since 2010. As a consequence, a lot of local councils are looking for commercial opportunities. That might be a food outlet in a park, but it can also be turning over a park to a commercial event.

At the moment, Winter Wonderland is on in Hyde Park. From my own local authority, Lancaster City Council, I know the main park in Lancaster, Williamson Park, becomes a music festival every summer, Highest Point Festival, which comes with quite a lot of challenges in terms of the conflict between having public access to urban green spaces and local authorities trying to balance their books.

I just wondered whether I could probe you on the advantages and disadvantages of these commercial events. What is the impact on local residents and the environment? Thinking about the environment, I know that there was a Tough Mudder event in Finsbury Park earlier this year. There was quite a lot of press coverage on the state that the park was left in at the end.

Graham Duxbury: It is an inevitable consequence of where we are in terms of revenue budgets that this is going to happen and is going to happen more. Yes, the numbers you have quoted are numbers that we recognise in terms of the decline in spending on parks and other leisure type activities in local authorities. Upper-tier local authorities have been hit hardest because anywhere that has a social care bill to pay has to take that funding from somewhere else.

That is why there is an argument about whether parks and green spaces should be a statutory duty. Making it so does not necessarily make it happen. There are lots of things that are statutory duties that there is still no money for. You have to weigh the pros and cons of that.

We are stuck with the fact that there will have to be revenue-generating opportunities that local authorities take on in order to fund their parks and green spaces. Quite often, they will be in destination parks, so bigger parks and green spaces. If that revenue is raised, the parks are made good and it helps with the longer-term upkeep and maintenance of those spaces, in my view we have to accommodate it.

The fact that some of those events are not particularly well managed and that communities get upset is something that needs attention. That goes back to my earlier point about the degree of community engagement. The degree of consultation that local authorities and other landowners are able to run around these events is important.

The last point I would make is that quite a lot of our work as Groundwork does not necessarily take place in those big, high-profile destination parks. It takes place in the neighbourhood green spaces, the much less formal spaces that are generally more important to the people who live close to them. We would like to see a lot of that revenue-generating activity feeding back into that wider infrastructure of green spaces in a place.

It is inevitable and it could be managed better in certain circumstances, but there are upsides in terms of revenue budgets. If we could spread those benefits more widely across all of our green estate, that would be preferable.

Q65 **Cat Smith:** Are there any examples of councils that are able to generate income from these destination parks spending it on perhaps more local community parks? I am thinking about my own constituency. Williamson Park, as the destination park with the Highest Point Festival, gets the revenue. I am not aware of my city council investing any of that revenue in the playground on the Ridge Estate. That is possibly the oldest and most out-of-date playground, but it is only probably a 10 or 15-minute walk from that destination park and serves some of my poorest constituents. Would you say that is reflective of what you see across the country?

Graham Duxbury: It probably is. I cannot give you a perfect example of the contrary, where I can see that happening perfectly well. You are probably right in that assessment.

Professor Ward Thompson: I would just throw into the mix an Edinburgh example, rather than an English example. We get a lot of use of destination parks during the summer festival period and from the winter festivals. It is very controversial.

The council is just rolling out a new policy, very new, with four principles. First, the process for decision-making on whether to allow these has to be transparent and accountable. Secondly, the process and activities have to be proportionate to the nature and scale of the location so you do not have something that is completely inappropriate to the nature of that particular green space.

Thirdly, the activities have to have a positive effect on the communities. For the larger activities, that means they have to liaise with community groups in order to agree what that positive effect might be. There is trialling of a levy of £1 per ticket for ticketed events, which goes back into the local park or parks. I realise there is a discussion to be had about which parks that goes into, but it is rather like a tourist bed tax.

Finally, the organiser must minimise the impact and has to liaise with residents and stakeholders about those impacts. It is often about—Tough Mudder will be an example—reinstatement afterwards. It is not just what new facilities we might get out of it or what activities might be funded from it. It is about how you will reinstate this morass of mud so that we can again use it as a nice place in which to walk the dog or kick a ball around.

There are no easy answers, but managing it will help. If the community can see clear direct benefits and if they have some control over how the money is spent, they are more likely to feel positive about it. There is certainly evidence from Edinburgh for that.

Q66 **Cat Smith:** Are you aware of any examples where local residents have had, say, free tickets or access to some of these commercial events that have been in their local park?

You were talking about a positive effect on the community. The community is often priced out of entering these venues. For instance, for the Wireless Festival in Finsbury Park, it is £95 for a single day ticket. The community in Harringay and Islington is probably not the wealthiest of communities. They are completely priced out of their own local park.

Professor Ward Thompson: Yes. I am not aware of that. From my experience—Graham or Elaine may know of other examples—it is less, "Give us free access" and it is more, "Give us something we can use to do what we want to do in our local green space as a result of tolerating this happening on our patch".

Q67 **Chair:** We have talked a lot about activities that individuals can carry out in these green spaces, exercise, walking, etc. Graham, could we do more to bring communities together in some of these green spaces or are we already doing quite a bit of that?

Graham Duxbury: An awful lot of that goes on, but an awful lot more could be done. As community resources, green spaces in urban areas offer a whole heap of benefits.

We have talked about all the benefits for individuals in terms of their personal wellbeing, but they also offer the ability for people to come together and meet. Traditionally, people might have met in a local community centre, a local church or a local shop. Many of these things do not exist anymore. Parks and green spaces can serve that purpose and can provide that function.

Again, some of this comes down to how they are managed and how they are activated. We have mentioned a few times friends of parks groups, which are a tremendous resource. There are about 7,000 volunteer groups operating around the country. At last count, there were about 60,000 individuals involving those friends of parks groups. Investing in that infrastructure, in order to allow those friends of parks groups to mobilise and activate events and so on in their local parks, has to be part of the way in which we build cohesion within local areas.

People involved in that network will say there is work that needs to be done to make sure that they are more diverse groups of people and that they have a better capability to engage all sections of their local community in those events. You have everything from using parks and green spaces for educational enrichment purposes to using them for adult learning purposes in order to help people train and get new green jobs in nature management and so on. There is a massive variety of benefits for a local community from these green spaces.

Q68 **Chair:** One of the major uses of outdoor space in urban areas is allotments. I am told there are 320,000 allotments in the country, which means that the equivalent of £300 million worth of food is produced on those allotments for families.

It is interesting. I was talking earlier in the year to Sir John Armitt, who developed the Olympic Park in Stratford. One of the big problems they had was that there was a big area of allotments that they had to take over to build one of the stadiums. They were worried that the working-class community would lose a source of producing cheap food. As it turned out, a very large proportion of the people with the allotments came down from Islington to grow their organic veg. Have we lost the tradition of working-class people producing fruit and veg in their own gardens? Has it become a bit of a middle-class thing to do?

Graham Duxbury: That might have become the case. Contrary to that, however, there is a huge, diverse, rich and vibrant network of local community food projects operating right across the country. There are brilliant networks. There is the Incredible Edible network. Sustain has its network. You have the Social Farms and Gardens network.

The desire and appetite for people to come together, communally quite often, to grow food on community allotments as opposed to individual allotments is absolutely there. One of the challenges is how you sustain that activity. Quite a lot of the time it is done for the social benefit that people get from coming together and growing food. It is not necessarily done for the purpose of putting food on the table or selling food into a commercial supply chain. These community food-growing networks are quite often propped up by grant funding, but this is really powerful.

We run a huge number of projects in our network that effectively use food as the reason why people come together in green spaces. If we go to a place like Speke in Liverpool, Grow Speke was a redundant old piece of tarmac in the middle of a housing estate and it is now a vibrant community allotment managed by Groundwork and South Liverpool Homes. People gather around it and grow food. It produces honey, and they can sell the honey. The social element draws people, but the food really motivates and stimulates the conversation. That tradition is alive and well. It is just taking a different form.

Q69 **Chair:** That is presumably about sharing skills that may have been lost in some of these communities.

Graham Duxbury: Yes, absolutely. It is also about welcoming and integrating newcomers to the community. We have run a number of projects that have used food as the basis for bringing refugees and asylum seekers together in open spaces to help them integrate. You can embed language skills into those sessions; you can embed housing advice into those sessions. Food is a fantastic catalyst, but, as I say, it is in need of a more sustainable footing in terms of how you fund those activities.

Q70 **Chair:** Elaine, presumably there are health benefits from people getting more activity and also producing healthy food.

Dr Mulcahy: Yes, and particularly for people with long-term health conditions. There have been a few cases of this, one of which I believe was in Lambeth. The local community came together and developed gardens at GP surgeries and NHS hospitals to help people with long-term health conditions. They grew their own food locally. They found that those individuals felt less isolated and it helped their conditions. The outcome of it was fewer hospital appointments. There is evidence of health benefits there as well.

Q71 **Chair:** Jeremy Corbyn and I only have two things in common. We are both MPs and we are both massive fans of allotments and growing fruit and veg. It is just such a great thing to do. It is so sad. Certainly, in my constituency there is a big former council estate, but you are lucky to find a rhubarb plant there. Thirty years ago, show-class vegetables would have been grown there. That seems to be a skill that has gone. I do not know. Do we need more allotments in the country? There are often big waiting lists for them.

Graham Duxbury: There is still a huge waiting list for allotments, but community allotments can really help to fill that gap. Taking on an allotment is quite a big responsibility and not that many people can do it. If you can go to a community garden where there is an allotment space, you can meet up with friends and volunteer to upkeep a garden, and you can sit around and eat the food that is grown there, that is the perfect solution.

Q72 **Chair:** Finally, turning to educational impacts and opportunities, could we be doing more in our schools to instil this love of green spaces and growing fruit and veg? I know some schools now have school orchards where trees have been planted, etc. Do we really need to start from the ground up to get people excited in these areas?

Graham Duxbury: For me, yes, absolutely. That is absolutely core to our mission. It is about helping people connect with nature and the environment, wherever they are. Starting in school is the obvious place.

We know there is a national initiative to get a national education nature park identified in order to support and help more schools think about how they use the green spaces on their campus and how that links to the curriculum. It is easier in primary schools than it is in secondary schools. That is one thing that we always find. The pressures in school become more intense as you move up the age groups.

For me, there should be a presumption in favour of using all our public estate for community benefit, where we can. That is schools, hospitals and even bits of MoD land. There is a whole range of stuff that we can utilise better for both biodiversity and health benefits. I would agree that schools are a really important place to start.

Q73 **Chair:** The other thing that occurred to me is that people used to do a lot more foraging for things like brambles. Certainly, on our farm all the low-hanging fruit used to go before my mother had got there. That seems to have gone. In some public urban areas, we could plant things that will lead to people being able to gather food. We could maybe put a sign up saying, "Please pick the berries".

Graham Duxbury: If you look at the Incredible Edible network, that still goes on. Those skills do exist.

Derek Thomas: They are out there in Cornwall. You cannot get any sloes for love nor money.

Q74 **Chair:** Our Polish friends who arrived quite recently are very good at identifying fungi to pick and they know which ones to eat. People in this country are very nervous about eating any fungi that are not particularly well known. Is there anything else the witnesses would like to add?

Professor Ward Thompson: Could I add a word for the slightly older children and teenagers? Starting from an early age is important. As I indicated earlier, that childhood experience will remain with people for the rest of their lives. It is not just about growing food, although that is really important. It is forest schools; it is being able to be wild and to explore how the world works in an embodied way.

Those of us who are lucky enough to have lived near countryside or wild areas understand what the tensile strength of wood means by jumping on a branch until it breaks. You really understand tensile strength after doing that. That is vandalism in a very carefully maintained small urban area.

How do you manage that wilder or freer play? That is particularly attractive to young teenagers, when they get a bit more independence to be able to travel freely away from home. We did some projects with teenagers a few years ago. They have a need for wild adventure space, places where they can take risks, learn about managing uncertainty, be themselves, chill out and not be told by adults, "Get away. We don't like you hanging around here". That can be really important for them.

The ecology of spaces that we need in our urban areas includes places to grow things, whether communally or individually, places where you can kick a ball about and wild places that can be explored. All of those are valuable. At different stages in life, we probably want different parts of those more than others.

Dr Mulcahy: I would just reinforce the message that Professor Ward Thompson gave earlier about instilling this really early on and the benefits of being engaged with nature from a young age and having that connectedness. The health benefits of that can span through your whole lifetime.

Q75 **Ian Byrne:** I just have a quick question for Graham with regards to potential job opportunities. In Liverpool West Derby, we have Grow West Derby. We have linked with Myerscough College to bring people in and train them up through City & Guilds. We have had a couple of people go into that field. Never in a million years would they have thought that was a field they wanted to go into. Have you utilised that with your organisation for people in urban areas?

Graham Duxbury: Yes, absolutely. We know there are massive skill shortages already in the way in which we manage land, not just urban green space but larger areas of land. We know that the skill shortage is only going to intensify as we try to invest more in nature recovery and other forms of land management. We need to find a pipeline of bringing people through into these industries.

Q76 **Ian Byrne:** Allotments can be that, can they not?

Graham Duxbury: Yes, absolutely. Managing small urban green spaces is a really useful stepping stone to bringing people into that profession.

We also need to diversify the sector because a lot of the stuff that we have been talking about in terms of making sure green spaces are accessible starts with having a more diverse workforce designing, planning and managing green spaces.

We are running something at the moment called New to Nature, which is a National Lottery Heritage Fund programme. It is about providing work placements in environmental organisations for young people from diverse backgrounds. These kinds of initiatives are out there to bring in new blood and more diverse groups into that sector at the same time.

Chair: The Committee is starting a new inquiry after Christmas on education in agriculture. One of the questions we will be asking is how we can get people from urban backgrounds to take some of the great opportunities in agriculture, horticulture and the management of our green spaces in towns.

Elaine, I know you have to dash off and catch a train back up to civilisation. Thank you all very much indeed.