



Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Urban Green Spaces, HC 164

Tuesday 30 January 2024

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[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Sir Robert Goodwill (Chair); Steven Bonnar; Ian Byrne; Rosie Duffield; Dr Neil Hudson; Mrs Sheryll Murray; Selaine Saxby; Cat Smith.

Questions 77 - 147

Witnesses

I: Mo Baines, Chief Executive, Association for Public Service Excellence; Liz Stuffins, Chair, Midlands Park Forum and Public Health Development Manager, Walsall Council; and Chris Avent, Green Estate Manager, Plymouth City Council.

II: Ellie Robinson, Head of Urban Green Space, National Trust; and Alan Law, Deputy Chief Executive, Natural England.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- [Midlands Park Forum](#)
- [National Trust](#)
- [Natural England](#)



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Mo Baines, Liz Stuffins and Chris Avent.

Q77 **Chair:** Welcome to the second session of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Select Committee inquiry into urban green spaces. We have three witnesses in our first panel who I would like to introduce themselves briefly and say a little bit about their organisation.

Mo Baines: Mo Baines. I am the Chief Executive of APSE, which is the Association for Public Service Excellence. We are a non-profit body, and we look after local authorities in promoting excellence in frontline services. Parks, and of course urban green spaces, are a huge part of our role in our work with local authorities.

Liz Stuffins: I am Liz Stuffins and I work for Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council. I also chair the Midlands Park Forum, which is a charity that works with people in the industry developing skills and experience.

Chris Avent: Hi there. My name is Chris Avent. I am the Green Estate Manager at Plymouth City Council. I sit in our environmental planning division and very much work as part of the team to pursue the importance of green spaces in the wider city.

Q78 **Chair:** Thank you very much indeed. I will start with a question about the current status of our green spaces. In your experience, how is the quality and quantity of urban green space? I am told it is about a third, on average, of urban land. How has that changed since 2017 and what has been the cause of those changes? Who would like to start? Liz, they are both looking at you.

Liz Stuffins: Certainly in Walsall it is the case that a third of the borough is actually green space, but it is not all accessible. We are very fortunate in that we have quite a lot of green belt land, which is managed by other people, the landowners. There are 2,000 hectares of green space within the borough and there are 10,000 hectares in the borough, so it is not quite a third that is accessible.

The quality has certainly declined over the last 20 years. We have not had the resources available to do the sort of work that we need to do, and we have suffered huge losses over the last decade in—

Chair: New developments?

Liz Stuffins: No. It is more about having the revenue to be able to maintain it to the quality standard we expect. We have had to pick out the best bits to maintain to a higher standard, to a green flag standard. As part of our strategy in the organisation, we have had to identify 20 strategic sites and the development team focuses most of its activity on those 20 key sites. Those are about 1.5 km for the majority of people around them to get to. It is quite a significant distance for people to walk



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and we want to try to have the 15-minute walking standard, which is the accessibility standard.

Q79 **Chair:** I have seen some stats showing that 59% of people on a medium income of £60,000 are within 10 minutes walk of a green space, but only 35% of people on low incomes of below £10,000 are. Is that reflected in what happens in your borough?

Liz Stuffins: Absolutely. The urban population is west of the borough and the good quality green spaces are pretty few and far between. We have incidental small bits of amenity space, we call it, but it is not good quality. There are no facilities. We have been taking out play areas for the past 20 years and concentrating again on those priority areas. We really do need to look at how we can maintain the revenue.

Q80 **Chair:** These spaces are still green but, because you are cutting the grass, you are allowing—

Liz Stuffins: We are calling them amenity green spaces. It is basically an area where the grass is cut so you can still kick a ball about, but it has no other facilities other than a patch of grass on the corner of an estate.

Q81 **Chair:** On the other parts where you are not cutting the grass, is that becoming a haven for wildlife, nectar and pollen?

Liz Stuffins: We are certainly doing a lot of improvements in biodiversity, but when you have a rye grass patch of land you have to do an awful lot of work to get it to the biodiversity status that you would like, which is of interest floristically and for nature and for insects. We have been experimenting with wildflower turf and other mechanisms to try to make those areas more biodiverse.

Q82 **Chair:** Thank you. Chris, are you in a similar situation in Plymouth?

Chris Avent: Yes, absolutely, from the perspective of the amount and the quality of the open spaces that we have in the city. Similarly, we have wide diversity in quality particularly and access to those. There is a lack of accessible green space in the most deprived areas of the city. There are more green spaces as you go to the fringes of the city, but across the board quality is the big challenge, having the capacity and the ability to maintain the scale of green space that is needed to meet those standards. For everybody in the city to have at least a green space within 15 minutes walk is a huge challenge with our current revenue availability.

In Plymouth in the last decade, we have had 26% fewer people in our workforce. The budget for maintaining our green spaces has reduced 34%. We have hit the bottom, and we are on an up trajectory. We have been fortunate in the last few years to look at new ways of raising revenues and providing more capacity, but the challenge still exists to ensure that we provide that for the city.

Q83 **Chair:** I represent Scarborough and Whitby. Particularly in Scarborough we have a lot of parks and gardens, but a lot of that is about the offer to



tourists. Are you doing stuff that is particularly targeted to encourage tourists rather than for locals?

Chris Avent: Yes, we have a mixed typology in our green spaces. Obviously, Plymouth has the Hoe, a very iconic vista destination. We do have a particular way in which we look to maintain that space because it has a high footfall and it is obviously important to the destination vista economy. The vast majority of the green spaces are neighbourhood green spaces, parks, for families to visit day to day. Those are the areas where we are really pressured for resource and capacity to maintain.

Q84 **Chair:** Turning to you, Mo, you will probably have more of an overview. Could you weave in the government grants that have been announced that are meant to improve the situation? How effective have they been? Have they been deployed? Do you need more money? That is probably a stupid question. I have never asked the question, "Do you need more money?" and someone has said "No". What is your overview?

Mo Baines: A very good question, Chair. To put that into the wider context of local government funding, data that we have tracked in our state of UK parks survey—which includes maintenance for urban green space as well—between 2010 and 2016 we found that £500 million had been reduced from those budgets. We ran that data and that found another £190 million had been lost up to 2021, so when we reported in 2022 the cumulative loss of revenue was £690 million on parks and urban space. That comes down to that there is a fairly recent trend, over the last decade or so, whereby local authorities apply for one-off specific grants. They are often bid for and that money is incredibly useful—things like the pocket parks funds. That does not allow long-term planning on the revenue side.

We have found pulling back on day-to-day maintenance and management of those services in some of the urban space, so you have the idea that we are seeing more scrubland developments by default rather than by design. Of course, in some areas where there is a cultural offering you may see horticultural wonders in public realm, so we are seeing this real differential.

To balance that somewhat, last year our state of the market report found that 37% of our member councils said that they expect to see an improvement in the management policies and the funding available. What appears to have happened is local authorities have taken another look at the finances of these non-statutory services and decided that they may be non-statutory in nature but actually the impact on local communities is highly visible and it is highly important in health and wellbeing impacts.

We are starting to see a better balance towards decision making in the money that is available for parks and urban green space. There has been that issue, but quality most certainly declined for a significant period because councils were rationing and, as you might expect, they were putting funding, quite rightly, into adults and children's services and



homelessness services. What was left in the pot for these services, which we have seen almost like the icing on the cake of public services—they are the “nice to have” but they are not essential. We are seeing that trend start to reverse a little, but the bid pots of funding do not address the long-term revenue streams that are needed for proper management of green space.

Q85 Chair: How important are volunteer groups? I know in Whitby we have the Friends of Pannett Park who do a load of work there, and in the Esplanade Gardens in Scarborough people organise litter picks and that sort of thing. Is that something that is across the country or may only be in more middle class areas where people are motivated to do these things or have the time?

Mo Baines: I would say, Chair, that it is a bit of both, but the issue with that is it can only be additionality to the public services rather than replacement of. People will be willing volunteers.

The other issue that our member authorities readily identify is that the level of involvement is very episodic. You will have a group of people who are very enthusiastic and then a couple of people may unfortunately start to suffer from ill health. Recruiting new volunteers is always an issue and certainly recruiting younger volunteers is always an issue. You tend to have retired people with time on their hands who are quite happy to get involved, but it is certainly not a replacement.

Some of the heavy machinery, the higher risk work that they do, the heavy lifting, planting trees, is hard going. It is heavy work. As a whole, they will be very welcome additionality but you cannot replace the professional parks cohort of people who are able to do that horticultural work.

Q86 Chair: You are nodding, Liz. Is that your experience in Walsall?

Liz Staffins: Yes. We have been fortunate in Walsall in that we have had development officers to be able to work with communities to enable capacity building of those schemes, so go into a community and work with a group to develop a friends group, but it is not always there for a lot of—certainly, the district councils that we work with through the parks fora. There is a requirement on officers to have a certain number of skills, a skillset to be able to work with the community, enabling and capacity building.

Q87 Chair: Chris, is that the same situation with you?

Chris Avent: Yes, very much so. In Plymouth we have focused investment in developing community activity. We have a number of friends groups around the city, but I think, as Liz described, effort is required to sustain and support those groups to be a cohesive and valuable network. It takes time, resource and effort to enable that. It is definitely something that is very valuable. It provides agency for local communities to get involved in shaping their green spaces and looking at



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the management and growth of them, but it comes at a cost and effort to enable that to happen.

Q88 Chair: Have any of you used offenders on the community payback schemes, painting railings and that sort of thing? That is part of it as well.

Chris Avent: Yes. We look across the board in engaging with all sorts of stakeholder groups. There are the probation services, which don't come for free—you need to pay for their services. It is a valuable part of urban green spaces and the management of them, but they need to be resourced and fixed.

Chair: Not always the most motivated people, necessarily, I suppose.

Chris Avent: Well, I don't know. I think it is a broad range, like any group that people are in. That is the one great thing about green space, particularly in urban settings. It inspires people and they want to be there. You see this upswell of energy, passion and interest and we have seen huge successes for individuals in Plymouth.

Chair: That is encouraging. Thank you.

Q89 Rosie Duffield: Obviously we all know that local authorities' funding is so stretched, but how do you all think that local authorities can protect that funding for urban green spaces? You have touched on this a bit, but what are your main points on that?

Mo Baines: There have been calls that parks should be a statutory function and urban green space actually rejects that. The reason we reject that is the minute you make something a minimum standard it becomes a very low bar. It is a little bit like the statutory duty on libraries. You have a library; you have fulfilled your statutory duty but are you really offering learning environments across whole localities? So, we reject that.

There is a strong argument that obviously it goes to the heart of some of the horrendous problems that we are seeing now in local authority funding, and we are very pleased with the announcement by the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities of the additional funding last week for local authorities—£600 million in total. The reality is that £500 million of that will be swallowed up into adults and children's services, so I suppose the big picture is that unless we resolve the huge issue of how we fund social care, all other council services are competing for the same limited pot of money.

We have lots of examples of good innovation in local authorities where people have—with a very small "c"—commercialised some of their green space. There is Nottingham City Council, for example, with some of the cultural offering in parks and authorities that have set up their own parks nurseries, all of which is put back out into the community. It is profit for a purpose. It goes back out into communities and helps support some of those urban green space developments. Sponsorship is another idea, but



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none of these things is particularly easy and they are fraught with difficulties.

When we have an obesity crisis among children, do you want—I won't mention any specific confectionery companies—a big confectionery company sponsoring in the very area where you are saying to young people, "Get out and get active"? Those things are never easy to do. One of the recommendations we have made in previous reports is parks champions and urban space champions among local elected members, so that there is a voice for the benefits of those services, whereas it tends to be swallowed up within the whole suite of environmental services. Some real champions—I was going to say "grassroots champions", so forgive me: that was totally accidental—would be there in a local authority.

Chair: I encourage more of those sort of puns if anyone wants to—

Q90 **Rosie Duffield:** Does anyone else want to come in on that?

Liz Stuffins: Yes. We have been forced into a situation where we are having to go for all sorts of different funds and be more innovative about how we find money. That has been an interesting challenge to try to work through. Events have been difficult, certainly, in the area where I work. There is not a lot of disposable income. People cannot afford the ticket for the annual bonfires, so it is trying to pitch it correctly. A neighbouring borough in Wolverhampton has just done a fantastic lighting-up event with £50 a ticket for a family. Many people could not afford it and they will not be doing it again, basically, because of the difficulties of people being able to afford those sorts of events.

There are lots of challenges for us to find those ways of funding. We have been fortunate in Walsall that the councillors have wanted to do lots of work around play area improvements. We did not do play area improvements for the last 10 years and now we have a little bit of capital to do a quarter of the play areas that we would like to see improved. There are bits and pieces that we can draw upon with section 106 funding through developments, that kind of thing. We draw in as many different sources of external funding capital to improve what we have.

Q91 **Rosie Duffield:** Thank you. Chris, do you want to add anything?

Chris Avent: Yes. We have been doing a lot of work in the area of finance, looking at how that applies to our local authority context. I think it is important—if not the most important—to build parts of the platform we need to provide a sustainable future for our urban green spaces.

There is another example in Plymouth. As part of our future parks programme, we look very much at how we can set up and organise ourselves to provide sustainable finance going forward. We have created an arm's length vehicle from the council, for governance, a financial vehicle, called Ocean City Nature. That is an enabling vehicle to bring in new forms of finance—private investment, philanthropic funding,



essentially—to direct towards specific targeted activities and interventions in our green spaces.

We have set up the first habitat bank in the country, which is utilising biodiversity net gain policy and has £0.5 million of investment. That will improve 109 hectares of green space in the city over a 30-year period. It is quite small relatively, but it is scalable. It is an interesting and valuable area to invest in further. It has taken us through the future parks programme and the Natural Environment Investment Readiness Fund. That has been a three and a half year journey to get to this point, so it is not easy.

It takes an awful lot of work within local authorities to enable that to happen, lots of stakeholder engagement. As we have described, the hollowing out of local authorities does not make that an easy task when you have only one finance colleague and one legal colleague to work with. To do that is definitely a route for local authorities to take with partners as well, to do that in partnership with others, but it requires investment to enable that to happen.

Q92 Rosie Duffield: Thank you. You have all stepped into the next question, which is: can private finance fill the gaps in public funding? Mo mentioned confectionery companies, but Liz mentioned section 106 and that is what I think. In Kent it is actually quite a struggle to keep Kent the garden of England, amazingly, because we have lots of new developments that we desperately need. Section 106 seems to be a bit piecemeal and if developers are going to benefit from all that lovely green space in Kent, it would be great if they could invest more in those areas. I think that Mo was certainly hinting at it being a bit of a false economy. If we don't invest in those green spaces, it really causes problems down the line in social housing and all of these things are all caught up in that, aren't they?

The next part of the question is: does the Government need to give local authorities more power to raise public revenue and ringfence it for that? That stops us having to go to private finance, doesn't it?

Mo Baines: Yes, private finance is fraught with difficulties, not least because certain areas will be more attractive than others at that level of investment. We do not want to create an exacerbation of current inequalities in access to good quality green space, so that is a huge issue.

The Levelling-up and Regeneration Act that introduced the concept of the national development management policies—which would allow some climate change biodiversity targets to come within that—is obviously still under development. APSE tends to support the local environmental improvement plans that were put forward by the Royal Town Planning Institute, because that would pull together a number of these issues so that you see sensitive developments that allow for climate biodiversity and health and wellbeing needs.



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At the moment, it is a very disparate picture. We have lots of different regulations, guidance and governance that comes forward and often that drowns out local needs. We very much support local environmental improvement plans to bring that together.

There is obviously a place for private finance, but many parks, for example, are held in different forms of trust. They have been granted by charitable deed in the past. They are not necessarily there. There is huge public resistance when we talk about housing developments, for example, around green spaces and green belts. The sensitivities of those issues are really important. Also, the finance is often more expensive than you would be able to do through public funds, so it is fraught with difficulties to introduce some of those measures.

Q93 **Rosie Duffield:** Thank you. Does anyone else want to make any more points?

Liz Stuffs: Yes. In the previous Select Committee that we had in 2017, there was a parks action group that looked specifically at finance. One of its suggestions was to try to look at a preset so that you ringfenced that funding specifically for green spaces. I obviously thought that was a fantastic idea, so that is one of my recommendations.

Chair: Thank you. Roundabouts seem very popular for commercial sponsorship because, although it is not public access, there are lots of places via adverts to attract people's attention to what they are doing. Sheryll, I think you want to come in.

Q94 **Mrs Murray:** Yes, if I could drill down a little bit on the Plymouth City Council's plan. First, Chair, I should declare an interest as the MP for South East Cornwall. Plymouth City Council part owns a park in my constituency, Mount Edgcombe Country Park. From about 2001 to 2005, I was the joint chairman of that joint committee.

I notice that you say you have piloted these new approaches with park management and funding, including habitat banking. Can you give us a little bit about how successful that is and how that would work in the different green spaces in Plymouth? I am thinking Central Park or Devonport Park, which are the traditional parks, maybe Plymouth Hoe, which is a little bit different again, Plymbridge Woods, and of course, in my own constituency, Mount Edgcombe Country Park. They are all different. Can you tell me how this habitat funding banking works and do you have anything that you think would be beneficial to other areas?

Chris Avent: The way that habitat banking works in its very simplest sense is that we have set up a vehicle at arm's length to the council to bring in initial investment—the same as any business of work or start-up fund—that enables us to deliver the biodiversity improvements on the ground. It uses the biodiversity net gain policy introduced through the Environment Act. We create biodiversity units that we can sell to developers as they require them to meet their planning obligations.



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Those revenues flow back into the vehicle to enable us to continue to improve those green spaces for a 30-year period.

We have targeted three sites initially. They are nature reserves, in essence. They are publicly accessible sites spread across the city. Depending on demand, that will last us for about 10 years in sales. However, if sales come forward a lot more quickly, we have the ability to target other sites around the city. We have certainly been looking at, and we have been challenged by our chief executive on this, to focus a bit more on some of the more visited spaces of the city: how can we generate more biodiversity in locations that are more visited?

We have done the groundwork. We have done the survey work to understand what the capacity and the opportunity is there. Depending on demand, we potentially will be able to move forward with the next batch of sites in the near future. As I said, it depends on sales around those. Any local authority would have the similar ability to do the same. It is about choosing those sites carefully.

Q95 Mrs Murray: Looking at perhaps the park that I know that you have joint ownership of—and I know that very well—and you work in partnership with Cornwall Council on this. I know that when I was the joint chair, we introduced a wedding licence, which was my initiative. It raised a lot of revenue for the running of that park. I think I am right in saying that, through different commercial operations, Mount Edgcumbe Park now is not a financial burden on Plymouth City Council or Cornwall Council because it is self-funding. Could you give us an idea of how that works?

Chris Avent: It is outside my departmental area because it is a joint operation.

Q96 Mrs Murray: It doesn't come under Plymouth City Council parks?

Chris Avent: It does come under Plymouth City Council, but it is in a different department of Plymouth City Council. It comes under our economic development division. I can go away and look into that. I think you are broadly correct, knowing what I know about the park and the team that I collaborate with there, but I would need to look at the specifics of it.

We have another example in Plymouth of a new community park off the back of a new development in the north of the city, where no council money has gone into the funding and creation of a new park—50 hectares of new public land, which we have now opened up and created. We have a sustainable business model to support the ongoing maintenance and activity in that park, called Derriford Community Park.

There are examples of the ways and means where we can use the planning system to bring through section 106 money to kick start activity, generate revenues and fund parks long term. Again, that is another 10-year journey, and it is only because we have been able to



invest and provide the capacity to enable that to happen, and I think a lot of local authorities are not in a situation to do that.

Q97 **Mrs Murray:** We can take it from what you are saying that it is quite a successful operation. How successful has the model you are using been?

Chris Avent: Are you talking about the habitat banking model?

Mrs Murray: Yes, the message I am getting is it is successful because you are looking at rolling it out.

Chris Avent: Yes. We have started it. We are literally about to make our first sale. I would say the success is still to be measured but, because of the work that has gone into establishing it, I am confident of success because we know the nature of the need there will be for biodiversity units. How quickly that success develops I think is the acid test for us, over the next three or four years, to see how that flows through.

Q98 **Ian Byrne:** Just on that, Chris, you touched on the different green spaces. I think it is really important. Within my constituency there might be just a bit of green land that never in a million years could be self-financed but the importance of it is paramount for the health of the people around it. It is hugely important that these places are financed and looked after because of the importance of them.

I want to go onto question 3. We are doing another panel session in the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee on green spaces and I want to read this out. Clive Betts said that it was one of most powerful pieces of evidence he has ever heard, and I concur with that. It is from Dr William Bird. I won't go right through it, but the transcript is there from last week—fantastic. He said, "We now know that the brain changes because of chronic stress. It is buffered by the green space. This seems to be far more obvious in children who are from deprived communities, where they are getting a lot of stresses from other areas. We seem to find that this reduces inequality of health. The more green space you put into an area, the fewer inequalities in the health of those children will come through." That is how it was. It is all evidence based and it was absolutely astounding.

I am going to talk about local decision making, but there doesn't seem to be the importance put on green spaces. That is why I am delighted that this evidence session is taking place and the report that we make. In light of that, and also when you look at some of the Government statistics on some of the actual moneys that they say are raised from green spaces, it helps climate change, environmental benefits—£6.6 billion, staggering sums—and the health perspectives and everything around it.

Is there enough joined-up thinking at a local level to encourage investment in green infrastructure to deliver the variety of benefits that are tackling health inequalities, everything around that it can provide: the recreation, improved health and climate adaptation? Is the importance attached to what this could actually achieve in communities? I will go to



you first, Mo.

Mo Baines: No, there isn't enough joined-up thinking and there are not enough joined-up financial incentives either. The way that local authority funding works is effectively trying to put together pots of money. There is a lack of ability to have long-term planning. If a local authority, by its investment in its green space, is addressing exclusion issues for children, improvements in health, if those things help the education system or the NHS, we don't actually see the benefits in the local authority pot of money. In some senses, they are investing in those services for the good of the community. It has a knock-on effect in a positive way on other areas of the public sector, but we do not have that joined-up thinking.

You are absolutely right in the evidence set there, the work of Dr William Bird is fantastic. He has spoken on many occasions for APSE. There is absolute medical evidence of the outcomes, particularly for children. There has been some mapping as part of the levelling-up agenda. There is mapping of green spaces.

One of the papers that come from the levelling-up strategy looked at the holistic map of where green spaces lie, but the quality of those green spaces, as you say, in even the most deprived area with a small amount of green space where people can walk the dog, kick a football, are still very valuable to those communities. That joined-up thinking, unfortunately, is not always evident and we will often see insensitive developments that are permitted that work against the public health interest in those areas.

Q99 **Ian Byrne:** Liz, do you want to add anything?

Liz Stuffins: Yes. We always talk in local government about silo working particularly, and I think that there is probably a bit of silo working between DLUHC and DEFRA particularly, so parks, green spaces fall between stools. What we have tried to do, certainly in the West Midlands area—in Dudley, particularly—we were fortunate to get an external grant funded programme through Public Health England. We developed some projects around making sure that we understood how important parks and green spaces were within Dudley, doing the links with public health and the public health department.

When I moved over to Walsall, the public health department was very closely linked to environment and it was within environment services, but very quickly after I joined—within 12 months—the adult social care Bill was flagged up as being super important and then public health was moved over into that area of work. I still have a very strong connection with the public health officers that helped to subsidise the work that we were doing in green spaces.

As you say, the evidence is there. We all know that if we had the opportunity we would love our children to be able to run through long grass and enjoy climbing trees, all of that stuff. We know how important



it is to our own mental health, to our children's mental health, yet there are still these massive problems in areas of deprivation where children don't get the opportunities. Parents are scared for their children to go out and they get stuck on screens instead of enjoying the green spaces.

There is all of that stuff about understanding risk, particularly around climbing trees, understanding all of those things as a child, for your child's development and how important that is. However, the fear in areas of deprivation, when you hear all the stories in the press it is very concerning, knife crime, that sort of thing. You will not let your child out simply because of the levels of antisocial behaviour.

Ian Byrne: It is massively detrimental to their health.

Liz Stuffins: Yes.

Q100 **Ian Byrne:** Chris, do you want to add anything?

Chris Avent: Yes, just a couple of things on that. I think that you are absolutely right that the evidence and the need for green spaces for the health and wellbeing of society as a whole is there, isn't it? Now it is about how we drive forward that change to enable it to happen.

Local policy is so important to enable joined-up working and bring that forward. Natural England has produced the green infrastructure framework, which is fantastic, for providing that kind of infrastructure at a local level. That needs to be pushed hard and for local authorities to pick it up and run with it as a tool, as an instrument to use.

Also, particularly in the areas that are most in need of green spaces, it is about the significant investment that is needed to retrofit green spaces in those places. That is where Government capital funding can drive significant change. It doesn't come cheap to take a street and urban space and retrofit a number of landscape features that give a better quality of place to live in, but you can have the multiple benefits that we hear about. Those sums, the value, the millions and billions of pounds attributed to it can be realised if we invest that money in it, but it will require a concerted effort over a period of time to bring that forward.

Q101 **Ian Byrne:** It should be politically vital atop the agenda from a levelling-up perspective, and also prevention. The prevention elements of it from a health perspective are just absolutely huge.

I will stick with you, Chris. To what extent will government initiatives such as green social prescribing and local nature recovery strategies help to bring together relevant stakeholders?

Chris Avent: Yes, they do. There is a number of government initiatives that lead us towards that path. I think one of the challenges we have at the minute is it is a really crowded landscape. From a policy perspective, the Environment Act brings forward loads of positive initiatives. There is an awful lot of challenge in the sector at the minute to piece together



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where those opportunities fit together and could take us forward. From my perspective, a recommendation is to take a good hard look at that and how we enable these things to move the—

Ian Byrne: The right recommendations, though.

Chris Avent: My thoughts on this I suppose are about that, so some really positive things. From an urban point of view, though, we need to also focus in on nature recovery strategies—they are done at county level broadly across the country—and how they shape the definition and the importance for urban green spaces that potentially will get lost in them. We need to keep driving those forward to ensure that they have the impact we need.

Q102 **Ian Byrne:** I will go to you, Liz. How well equipped are local authority staff to make the strategic case for greater investment in green spaces? Is natural capital accounting an appropriate way to achieve this?

Liz Stuffins: There is a lot to do in training and development for officers in natural capital accounting. I read a little bit of background material about Birmingham and the natural capital accounting process adopted in 2019, particularly around green spaces. There were some phenomenal sums coming out, but Birmingham is now in a very difficult financial position. I asked my colleagues, “How will that help in the decision making? You have these fantastic figures that you have developed, but how will that work when you are talking about your adult social care bill? What will come first?” The natural capital will not be the thing that helps to make those decisions about where the axe falls.

Q103 **Ian Byrne:** That is a fair point. Mo, do you want to add anything to that?

Mo Baines: Just on the workforce points around capacity. In APSE’s survey data from local authorities, 32% say that they have reduced frontline staff in parks but most importantly on the strategy, 41% report a loss of senior management. We are seeing a condensing of managerial tiers. You do not have the next generation of professionals coming in who understand that and 23% report that they have lost development staff, the people who would literally do the groundwork in their urban spaces. They are quite frightening statistics in being able to join the dots between the different pots of funding but also marrying the strategies between health, wellbeing, climate and all of those things.

Q104 **Ian Byrne:** Just to finish, Mo, a recommendation about how do you make it at the top politically. The evidence is there. We talk about it, the importance of it. How do you make it at the top politically, where it can garner attention in the decision making in this country and be treated with the seriousness it deserves? How do we do that?

Mo Baines: Going back to earlier, there is the opportunity there for looking at local environmental improvement plans. One of the recommendations that APSE made previously about local government as a whole and the joined-up accountability between all of the different



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agencies that react and interact with local communities is to look at local public accounts committees. Politicians get a bad press, and I am a nerd and I love watching the Public Accounts Committee in holding people to account. It is fantastic. There are such skills there to do that. We lack that at a local level, so people can do harm to some of these strategies, because there is a lack of joined-up thinking.

There is an opportunity for local authorities to pull stakeholders into a room, drill down and scrutinise how they are contributing to the health and wellbeing of local communities. That is one area that we strongly recommend. Within that, of course, there are spheres of influence around local environmental quality and access to green space. At the moment, there is no holding to account the multiplicity of agencies that work in local areas.

Q105 Cat Smith: My colleague Ian has gone in depth into the health benefits of green infrastructure, but green infrastructure can also be a really good protector. In the nine years that I have been a Member of Parliament, I have seen my constituency flood—particularly December 2015—in a way that it had never done before in that the entire city centre of Lancaster was flooded. I have also seen the highest temperatures. Now we know that planting trees in urban environments helps to lower the temperature. We also know that green infrastructure can help alleviate floods.

My question to begin with is: how does the planning infrastructure or to what extent does it—or does it not—age using green infrastructure to protect from heatwaves and flooding, given that climate change is going in one direction currently and we are not doing very much else to stop it? Do you want to go first, Chris?

Chris Avent: Absolutely. I think the nature-based solutions that you describe are a core part of how we need to shape our green spaces, particularly in urban areas, for the future. The multiple benefits that are derived from that are known. Implementing those from a planning perspective is very much around ensuring that they are embedded in local plans and all the instruments are brought to bear at a local level.

There is always a challenge to keep up. Local plan timeframes take an age to come up, catch up and stay up to date. I am also a great believer in operationalising and getting out and delivering against those things as well. Where we can find ways and means of improving green space and delivering nature-based solutions we should be doing so, but you are working in tandem, working with a strategic perspective in trying to drive those agendas forward but also looking to ensure that, where we can, we find money and investment to implement those things. I think that you have to do both of those things in tandem to make change in the timescales we need.

Q106 Cat Smith: You are stressing, Chris, about how slow that can be. Is there any recommendation you would make to the Committee to try to



speed that up in responding to the crisis that is the climate emergency?

Chris Avent: From a Government position—I think I talked about it before—trying to bring it together to make a slightly more coherent policy position around it would be really helpful. Local authorities across the sector are trying to juggle with it and piece that together at the moment. If that was done more cohesively at a national level it would help and support the drive at a local level to act sooner.

Q107 **Cat Smith:** Thank you. Liz, do you have anything you would like to chip in with there?

Liz Stiffins: We are only starting on climate change in our local authority. We have only just appointed a climate change officer and building on that and working with our community. We have a long way to go with developing our action plan, but people are starting to understand the connections and how important it is to use flood prevention and tree planting to help those processes. We are still having to go to external funding organisations to get trees into the ground. Then there is the other factor of we have an awful lot of lowland heathland in our particular area, so we don't want to plant trees all over the precious habitat that we have on part of our—

Q108 **Cat Smith:** Sorry, Liz, does the planning system help or hinder?

Liz Stiffins: The planning system helps but, as our colleague in Plymouth has just said, it is an exceptionally slow process. We have an awful lot of work to do with our planning colleagues to understand the plans that we would like to see in place to protect those areas. We are working with the Wildlife Trust and other colleagues to look at nature recovery strategies. It will take a long time to get those off the ground, so two or three years in the future.

Q109 **Cat Smith:** Thank you. Mo, can I ask you a little bit about the biodiversity net gain aims? Of course, when you have private developers in a local authority that can put in green infrastructure, it often falls to the council to maintain it. When it comes to issues like that, do you have any examples of it working well or perhaps any recommendations you could make to the Committee to improve that?

Mo Baines: The main issue on biodiversity net gain is the huge learning curve there. That is not with planners. It has to be with the horticultural specialists in local authorities. What can we offer? We have embarked on training for local authorities on that. It has had great traction with the membership because there is a disconnect between planners and the people who plan and work in the urban green space. There is a disconnect there and we need to take an educational approach.

There is an over-concentration, probably, on new development rather than looking at existing sites and what biodiversity net gain can be achieved through, for example, retrofitting in the urban spaces. We are seeing some of that. The Greater Manchester Combined Authority, for



example, has a great process looking at putting in place rain gardens and seepage on permeable surfaces. It is actively working towards that. Hammersmith and Fulham is another area where, in the Queen Caroline Estate—I think it is known as—roof gardens have been put in. They are trying to tackle climate change with some of their existing infrastructure, so that is in place. I think there is a whole education process, particularly around the ability for retrofitting and some of the urban green spaces to be part of this.

If I may come back to the planning issue, I slightly disagree with Liz on the local plans in that the planning context now for local authorities is so complex and so hindered that many of them would argue that they are trying to embed climate matters with one arm tied behind their backs in what they can do. That may change for the better when the national development management policy is produced. In the meantime, the fear among local government is that because that will take precedence over local plans, local climate actions will be squeezed out and the priority in planning terms will go to that new framework. It may be positive but there is a lot of nuance in the detail: what will be contained in the new framework that is to emerge yet from the Levelling-up and Regeneration Act?

Many local authorities find that if they push too hard on developers, particularly with housing, they will go to a neighbouring local authority, one further away that is going to push less hard. Currently, the planning framework for local authorities is very difficult for them to navigate and is hugely complicated.

Q110 Cat Smith: You have drawn me to ask: are there enough horticultural specialists in local authorities? Chris, I think you mentioned at the beginning about the pressure on local authorities. Do we have enough horticultural specialists?

Mo Baines: No. We have seen a genericism emerge among parks and urban space staff. We lost a lot of staff through the era of austerity. It was a case of, "How can we flatten structures? How can we let people go?" Authorities attempted to do that in a very fair way, generally speaking, not with compulsory redundancies but by allowing staff to move on. Again, no pun intended, Chair, they have not been able to grow their own. They would look for the next generation coming through, skill them up and they would become the next set of parks professionals. We have lost that learning ability within local authorities because of the suppression of overall staff numbers.

APSE would like to see investment in horticultural apprenticeships; again, local authorities to rescale. Tree planting is an area. It has to be the right tree in the right place. Local authorities buying trees en masse, planting them without a maintenance plan, without knowing if they are the right species for that location—it is the right tree in the right space. We risk an awful lot when people have these beauty contests in the press going, "We're going to plant 100,000 trees". Well, good luck with that. Will they



be there in 12 months' time? Those are some of the questions that are facing local authorities.

Q111 **Cat Smith:** Thank you so much. Liz and Chris were both nodding for much of that. Is there anything that you would like to add before I hand back to the Chair?

Liz Stuffins: No, I don't think so.

Chris Avent: Picking up the point on the workforce, it is very important that we talk about horticultural specialism, but it is actually much broader than that. To achieve these broad nature-based solutions we need to think about the broad spectrum of workforce development and initiatives. That is where a lot of this links back to cross-sector, a very strong link to back to the Department for Education and funding around skills and developing apprenticeship frameworks and so on. There is a lot of need for that joined-up working at a local level and at a government level too.

Chair: Thank you, Cat. We are going to have to make some progress. If we can have short, pointed questions and short answers as well. Thank you.

Q112 **Mrs Murray:** Absolutely. If we could perhaps have some shorter questions, and do not repeat what somebody else has already said it might help.

What challenges do local authorities face in attracting and retaining staff, and what impact is this having on creating effective and inclusive green space? Can we go to you first, Chris?

Chris Avent: In attracting staff, it is a competitive recruitment world at the moment. In the last two or three years it has been a real challenge to attract people into the sector. That goes back to our ability as local authorities to look interesting to people. It is about marketing, comms and making sure that we are attracting the right kind of people with the skillsets we need.

On retention, definitely having a career progression and pathway is very important for people coming into the sector, which we don't naturally necessarily have. It is about updating our ability to do that and for people to grow and move up through the chain. Also, we often exist in a world of having more fixed-term contracts, because we are relying on pots of money, which then is a real challenge to continue to enable us to keep people in the workforce.

Q113 **Mrs Murray:** Thank you. Liz, if I can turn to you. If you have anything to add to what Chris has said that is different, please do so, but I have another question for you. What support do green space professionals need to enter and remain in the industry?

Liz Stuffins: My own organisation, the Midlands Park Forum, is a huge opportunity for growing people. Part of one of my recommendations is



looking to fora to try to develop the people who are already in post or grow those people. For retaining staff, people in local government want to expand and explore other areas so it is difficult to retain staff, but I think that bringing people up, looking at succession planning and making sure that you know how to move the whole team forward is the best way. Certainly, looking at fora like my own was another recommendation from the 2017 inquiry.

Q114 Mrs Murray: Thank you. Mo, I am not going to leave you out, so I will come to you with the final part of my question. Again, if you could keep it short and if anybody has anything new to add just indicate afterwards. Are there sufficient resources, guidance or tools available to maximise the benefit of green infrastructure while balancing its environmental health and social outcomes for the local community?

Mo Baines: I think it is generally the networks of local authority professionals between themselves. They do work together and share those different pieces of information. There is a number of design codes and design plans that people will draw down and take up, but it goes back to the capacity issue at the local authority level in having the right skills and being able to share that.

To close on your question, the issue of the skills shortages in urban green space is sadly no different to the rest of local government. Local government across the piece is suffering from a shortage in recruitment and retention of workers.

Mrs Murray: Thank you, but we are focusing on the inquiry today. Does anybody else have anything additional to add? Thank you very much.

Q115 Selaine Saxby: Who would like to go first on this one? How could Natural England's new green infrastructure framework help with local decision making? Will it drive progress and help local authorities work collaboratively to deliver new or better green spaces in urban areas? Does anyone have any strong views?

Chris Avent: I am happy to start. Yes, absolutely. As I described earlier, it is a fantastic framework for local authorities to work with. The key is how they bring that forward and embed that into their local strategies, local plans and local policies. That is the real challenge that we are faced with as local authorities, but it has all the hooks in there. It has the ability to provide urban greening factors and ensure that from a planning perspective and then from a delivery angle we are able to build holistic spaces that provide better urban green space.

Q116 Selaine Saxby: Thank you. Liz and Mo, if you have anything to add, and a follow-up question: what support do you think local authorities need to implement it alongside other government initiatives, such as the biodiversity net gain, and does it need to become a mandatory requirement?



Liz Stuffins: Yes, I feel it does need to be a mandatory requirement, but there is an awful lot of training and development work that needs to be done with our planners, and with professionals like me, with green space development professionals.

Q117 **Selaine Saxby:** Thank you. Mo, is there anything you would like to add?

Mo Baines: Yes, I agree with Liz on that. It is about co-ordination between the different disciplines across the whole of the local government family, and particularly the planning. We suffer from shortages in the planning area. Planners are under an awful lot of pressure and adding to that with what we want to achieve will be difficult for them.

Q118 **Chair:** Thank you. Just before we finish this panel, I feel I must ask Chris a little bit about trees in Plymouth. You would be expecting that, I suppose. We have heard the right tree, the right place. What went wrong in Plymouth and what lessons could we learn from what happened there?

Chris Avent: The model was a very ambitious scheme to deliver. Some of the things we were talking about—it has a really great subsystem, multiple benefits to improve a city centre green space. What happened was that the optics were very much wrong in how that decision was made, the local decision making.

Q119 **Chair:** Were the trees deemed to be dangerous or just clearing the trees to do something?

Chris Avent: Yes. The trees were being removed to enable all the underground works to take place, to put in underground systems to collect rainwater and recirculate it and then replant on top. That was the challenge there, which was not well understood beyond the project. It highlights the challenges for retrofitting and improving urban green spaces. It is a complex system and sometimes we need to make difficult decisions to improve things, but that takes capacity. It takes time and effort to enable that to be communicated well and taken forward. Sometimes mistakes happen with limited resources.

Chair: It can be very emotive. I know in the village of Irton, in my constituency, there was a massive campaign to save a beech tree that was causing problems for one house. We even had our own version of Swampy up there. They eventually chopped the tree down. I offered to give them a dozen trees in the village, but nobody wanted one outside their house, so we ended up putting them on the bypass outside. It is a very difficult subject, but certainly trees have an important part to play and if you fly over an urban area a tree with a trunk two feet in diameter has a canopy much bigger and has real impact.

Thank you very much indeed for being so helpful. We will now pass on to the next panel. Thank you.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Ellie Robinson and Alan Law.

Power outage/break in transmission.

Q120 **Chair:** Sorry for the slight technical break. We are trying to destroy the planet by plugging in an electric heater in this very cold room, which threw all the sockets out. We are now at least able to proceed.

When we broke, Alan, you were just in the middle of explaining to me how the two concepts of getting people more green cover and public access to green space and the Government's target of 10% biodiversity net gain are not mutually exclusive. Can you just quickly recap and then we will move on?

Alan Law: We need to have local nature recovery strategies that incorporate the needs of biodiversity and also incorporate the needs of people's access to the range of public benefits that green spaces can provide. One of the funding mechanisms for delivering some of that improvement is biodiversity net gain, so the local nature recovery strategies should identify where and how biodiversity net gain can contribute. In some cases, that will be through green infrastructure that has a very strong access and wider benefit provision. Is that clear?

Chair: Yes. For example, I have seen some parks where the pathways are cut but during April and May they leave areas for things to grow. That does not mean people cannot access the area; it just means that the use is mixed.

Alan Law: You get multiple benefits from the same area.

Q121 **Chair:** Ellie, do you have similar thoughts?

Ellie Robinson: Quite a lot of our city partners have taken their green estate and looked at the whole network and where they can create wildflower-rich meadows as well as thinking about increasing tree canopy cover. Having a strategic plan for their whole estate and doing it deliberately rather than doing it through neglect is very important and it is also important to take the public with them to engage communities and, where possible, to involve the public in the creation of meadows and all the other advantages of a more biodiverse and rich space. However, it is also about balancing recreational uses—sport—as well as biodiversity.

Going back to the previous panel session, having a clear green infrastructure plan for a whole city or whole town helps in planning the space and improvements well. The BNG component is very important.

Q122 **Chair:** Do you think that we need a more complex metric for how we measure green spaces in urban environments, their quality, accessibility and the social benefits as well as carbon? Are we being a bit too simplistic by just drawing a line around a bit of green and saying that counts?

Ellie Robinson: It is essential to understand the value of quality spaces. You spoke earlier about natural capital. The valuation of different



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ecosystem and social benefits from quality green spaces is an important baseline. Then it is about where and how to improve them and what value the improvement creates that gives the investment case. We have been trying different sorts of economic assessment tools to understand how we can best use the evidence from, for example, Natural England.

You spoke earlier about the fantastic health evidence from people such as Dr William Bird and others and from the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities. The evidence base on health and wellbeing is profound now but how can we use that evidence to show the increase in benefits to local communities? There is no single tool that helps local government. There are lots of different things and one of the things that DEFRA could do to help, with DLUHC, is to come up with a tool that meets Treasury's Green Book requirements and also allows an assessment of improvement of green infrastructure for health and wellbeing. Such a tool could be used for all sorts of investment cases for different sorts of funding, including public sector funding.

Chair: We would be better able to compare different local authorities doing different things with more uniform measurement of the value of different types of things.

Ellie Robinson: It is very important to have some standard metrics for how green a place is. Some of that is already there in the Environmental Improvement Plan but some of that has perhaps been written more for rural application, understandably thinking about woodlands and numbers of trees. A lot of DEFRA policy is about the numbers of trees and the carbon sequestered. In an urban setting, however, it is about tree canopy cover for urban cooling and the reduction of flood risk.

Just before Christmas, the Woodland Trust launched the tree equity metric, which is a very useful tool for understanding how tree canopy cover and the indices of multiple deprivation overlap. Natural England has a similar data layer within its green infrastructure framework and the mapping that has been done. Having a baseline standard is vital but having appropriate urban targets is vital too and we are not quite there yet across the piece, so there is a bit more work to be done.

Q123 **Chair:** In the first session we heard about the right tree in the right place. Is that something that Natural England could give guidance on? Local authorities are not experts on this, are they, and rely on people who know what they are talking about?

Alan Law: Indeed. I completely agree with Ellie about the need for us to be able to consistently measure quality improvements. My only word of caution there is that we should not engineer too much complexity into a regime that is already relatively complicated. You will have heard about the challenges within local government with having the right skills and capabilities lined up to make the most of their opportunities. If we engineer too much complexity, local authorities will struggle to deliver.



Certainly in Natural England the general trend is moving away from what was historically one-to-one, rather transactional activity—whether that is on planning or advice to farmers—to a more sophisticated support and convening role with local government and wider stakeholders around how to support placemaking and how to achieve multiple benefits in a place. We look at nature in its broadest terms. In our terms, nature includes access and built heritage. Nature is a much broader term than simply wildlife, which might be the assumption.

Q124 **Cat Smith:** Protections are available to green urban spaces in the planning system? Do you feel they are sufficient?

Ellie Robinson: You should have asked Chris Avent that question; he would have given you a brilliant answer. By protections, do you mean protections from development?

Q125 **Cat Smith:** Yes but also, if you can talk a little bit about what recommendations you have for better protecting urban spaces, for example, from any changes to green belt restrictions and those kinds of issues. Is that something that you feel confident talking about?

Ellie Robinson: I am not a planning expert. The other member of our panel here would have been really good.

Current protections in most plans are about allocating green spaces for priority protection of their use for recreation and local communities can also designate areas for protection in their local plans. The green infrastructure framework that Natural England has brought out provides the opportunity to set standards and targets for the improvement of quality for access and a range of green infrastructure outcomes. Protection is less about protection from development. What we are trying to look for now is the ability to improve spaces, to stop the decline in quality and to stop the erosion of their value to communities. The planning system is an important part of that but it also covers local government's corporate plans for a whole place.

A lot of the opportunity is about the value that a city or a town and all their sectors place on those spaces. I can give Birmingham as an example. Birmingham has gone from having a green infrastructure strategy that looked at areas of greatest need in their environmental justice mapping to looking at climate factors and health inequalities, which were then adopted as part of their local plan and have become part of the corporate vision for the city for 2040. That allows those things to become embedded in the city's levelling-up zone and the way local government is thinking about different placemaking pots of money from DLUHC.

That is all putting green infrastructure on the same footing as broadband and road and is valuable infrastructure for a place and for growth. The planning system is a key enabler. If the standards in the green



infrastructure framework are adopted in plans, it would help to drive change.

Q126 **Cat Smith:** That helps to set the scene and perhaps leads to asking you, Alan, what protections do you think are needed for green urban spaces? What is sufficient? What could we recommend to the Government?

Alan Law: I will start by saying that increasingly Natural England does not talk or think about protection in how it delivers its services. We are concerned about trying to ensure that we achieve healthy, resilient systems at scale. We are looking at providing infrastructure, exactly as Ellie Robinson described, seeing infrastructure there, some of which might be permanent in that it would need to be in a certain place to deliver certain functions; you cannot simply move rivers, for example. Other elements of infrastructure, however, and some parts of green spaces, might fall into this category; they could be in one place for a period but as the needs of communities change could be delivered in another place in another way at some point in the future. We start to think about systems health and quantity, scale of patch size and connectivity, proximity to people, and so on. We would start with that systems bit.

As for protections proper and the things that we deliver, we designate sites of special scientific interest. As the Committee will know, some of those are in urban areas—we have designated some areas in Greater London in the recent past—as well as in rural areas. They are relatively small in scale.

Of course, we have new powers under the Environment Act for conservation covenants. Those powers are relatively untested at the moment but we might wish to use them on the back of work undertaken by the green infrastructure framework to identify areas that we want to retain in the long term as part of the urban green infrastructure and are tools that could be used.

On the whole, we work with local authorities to ensure that they incorporate green spaces in their plans. We do not look to layer on additional designations ourselves otherwise it becomes a bureaucratic process.

Q127 **Chair:** I suppose people traditionally think about protecting green spaces as the green belt, the doughnut around an urban area. I was at a meeting last night where somebody suggested that the green belt, rather than being that sort of doughnut, should be more like a multipointed star so that urban people have access to some of that green belt rather than it isolating the town from the countryside. Have you heard that concept before now? It was a new one for me.

Alan Law: I have not heard the concept of a star shape but it makes sense. Certainly, our view is that a lot can be done to improve the environmental quality of green spaces for biodiversity and connectivity



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between urban and rural areas. Investing in greening the green belt is something that our chairman, Tony Juniper, has spoken to this Committee about.

Q128 **Chair:** Yes, because the green belt is not always all that green, is it?

Alan Law: It very often is not green at all. Yes.

Q129 **Chair:** Ellie, do you want to comment on that?"

Ellie Robinson: There is huge potential for the green spaces adjacent to towns and cities to be doing a lot more for their communities, particularly around access. A number of interesting projects are happening. We are working on 8 Hills outside Birmingham. There is a lot more to be done in looking at rivers going into cities where we have multiple opportunities to reduce flood risk and also opening up those rivers, as you have heard, in connection with rural multifunctional land use.

It is the same in urban areas, for instance the River Cole in Birmingham and the River Wandle in south London, where people are looking at the importance of blue/green corridors for access, for nature and for climate and also for improving connectivity for nature and as part of urban nature recovery strategies. In the land around cities, there are great opportunities to bring people out and nature in.

Chair: I think Ian Byrne has a quick follow-up.

Q130 **Ian Byrne:** Just a quick one, Chair. Unfortunately, Helen Griffiths of Fields in Trust could not be here, but I have a question about the Fields in Trust model. Liverpool is looking at protecting 80 green spaces; however, that is determined by local communities with Fields in Trust. Is that a model that you can see being utilised?

Ellie Robinson: A good question and I think Natural Trust has similar sorts of powers. For the community to have the power to protect something forever is very powerful and I support that. Cities need to be careful about pickling something in aspic and unwittingly preventing change. I am not suggesting the Fields in Trust model would do that; that would be a blunt application. However, if you think about what society's needs are now, and what future generations need, how can you allow spaces to change and grow? For instance, a green social prescribing centre would be brilliant in one of the parks but if you protected the park so that there could be no change, no development, would it prevent us from putting in things that would be useful for the community?

A lot of the opportunities facing places now are in challenging financial circumstances. You might be thinking about making green spaces spongier, not just as wildflower meadows but by putting in sustainable urban drainage systems. You have to be careful not to stop change. It must be about protecting for community benefit in the long term. Some work we did a few years ago looked at covenants and some of the old protections that had been brought in over the last 150 years. Could we



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modernise those covenants to give protection to the community but also allow a modern interpretation for health and wellbeing, climate adaptation and so on?

Q131 **Ian Byrne:** There is an element of that within the Fields in Trust agreement, protection of green space but moving with the times.

Ellie Robinson: It must also be about being able to earn some money and undertake some enterprise and ensuring that the community voice is that of the whole community, not just that of those who shout the loudest. That is vital for community protections.

Ian Byrne: Absolutely.

Ellie Robinson: Absolutely, a powerful tool.

Chair: Thank you. I am pleased you raised that.

Q132 **Mrs Murray:** Again, could we have short answers because we still have some work to get through?

Many Government measures focus on regulating future major developments. Should more be done to encourage private landowners and householders to retrofit green infrastructure into their buildings and gardens? We recently heard the announcement that if you wanted to fit solar on your roof, it would be VAT-free. That is very good, but should there be more done to encourage that sort of thing?

Alan Law: Yes. Evidence suggests that the return on investment for retrofit is 100:1 and is huge in comparison with the creation of new green spaces. I would not want that to turn into a conclusion that we should only focus on retrofit because the distribution of green spaces is not societally equal so both are needed.

Coming back to an earlier question about a quality indicator, if we are going to focus on retrofit we need to understand what quality improvements it would deliver.

Q133 **Mrs Murray:** Should private landowners have more responsibility or incentives to install green infrastructure on pre-existing sites? I think Ellie Robinson is probably the best person to answer this.

Ellie Robinson: The green infrastructure framework and its standards are very powerful because the standards are not only for new development but are also for retrofit, which is more challenging. Your question about what are the incentives is important. Natural England and the National Trust are about to jointly commission a piece of work on the fiscal incentives for green infrastructure.

Q134 **Mrs Murray:** You have a lot of properties that are listed or are in very sensitive locations, don't you?

Ellie Robinson: Yes. We are thinking about dense urban landscapes where there is very little green space and where you might be looking for



street trees, for rain gardens to reduce flood risk, the sorts of things that water companies want for large-scale change to reduce stormwater overflows and combined-sewer overflow problems, which I am sure you will have been hearing about in other inquiries. Water companies are thinking about their next investment horizon and how to invest at scale so there is a lot of opportunity to come up with some incentives that do not exist at the moment. You are right, it is a big gap.

Also, I don't think there are any incentives for homeowners to have spongy front gardens. Think about the level of change from a spongy surface, a green surface, to a hard, impermeable one; it is going in the wrong direction if you want to have a climate-resilient city or town.

We have been looking at another area of incentives. Plymouth has a freeport and there is a set of economic incentives for it. Birmingham has its levelling-up zone in the east. Could we be looking at economic incentives for local government or city regions, something like a natural infrastructure zone? Could green infrastructure strategies and areas of real improvement be designated and retain business rates and attract other incentives, from a micro-scale at a household level—your solar panel example—to the street, to the city? This area is unexplored and it is important to look into it to make it much easier for places to make progress,

Q135 **Mrs Murray:** Finally, a question first to Alan and then to Ellie if she would like to add anything. We have heard that in some places, large, privately-owned open spaces are unused, gated off or providing few ecological benefits. What more can be done to turn such places into valuable green spaces for the community? I know that often it can be quite controversial if a piece of land is privately owned, if we want public access and the right to roam. What are your thoughts on that, please?

Alan Law: I think we need the combination of strategic plans that identify green infrastructure potential and funding mechanisms that can draw together resources to make access and enhancements to those areas possible. In later questions, you may be looking at different funding models, special-purpose vehicles that can be used to pull moneys from developer contributions and deployed in areas like these. We need to put in place a combination of strategic plans and a funding mechanism in those areas.

Q136 **Mrs Murray:** Ellie, do you have anything to add?

Ellie Robinson: With some government officials, we saw a great example around the back of St Pancras station. It is a big meanwhile space. It is waiting for development. While it is there as a brownfield site, the community has it. There is a huge community growing space.

There are all sorts of opportunities like that for creative solutions but they rely on the private landowner wanting to engage and the potential uses for those kinds of spaces—golf courses, for instance. There are all sorts of



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private spaces but what is the incentive for the private landowner to be doing this sort of thing? That goes back to your first question. Is there something like social investment tax relief that is the private landowner equivalent to incentivise community benefit in whatever form that might take?

Mrs Murray: A farmer in my constituency has made a field available to the community for allotments. That is a case of a private landowner making land available for public use.

Q137 **Selaine Saxby:** Coming first to Alan Law, how will Natural England's green infrastructure framework tackle the lack of quality urban green spaces? What are you doing to encourage its uptake?

Alan Law: Currently, we are working with 30 local authorities and we will be extending that to 100 local authorities by 2030. I think you have heard some very positive views about the principles of the green infrastructure framework from others who have given evidence here.

We set out 15 principles and five standards. We will continue to evolve the standards and to develop new tools that can be played in. We have a mapping tool, giving a very detailed, quite granular evidence base around suitable areas for green infrastructure and we have people on the ground to work with local authorities on how that tool is used.

At the moment, the green infrastructure framework is entirely voluntary. Going back to an earlier question of would we like to see the framework, made mandatory in due course, yes, we would because I think that would result in a much stronger application and uptake of its use. Similarly, if some of our current targets were made statutory and given defined timelines, that would serve to focus attention on investing in the use of the GI frameworks and delivering the potential products from them.

Q138 **Selaine Saxby:** Ellie, have you come across any issues with the framework and how might they be resolved?

Ellie Robinson: The framework only came out in January last year but we very much welcome it and think it is helpful. However, going back to your previous conversation, the lack of visibility of green infrastructure as a national infrastructure that delivers a great amount of public benefit but falls between different Government Departments is a barrier. One thing that would help the uptake of the green infrastructure standards and embed them into plans that are delivered would be having a national green infrastructure strategy. That would help bring together the key parts of government that have policy implications. It would help bring together the different pots of funding. As was hinted at in the previous session, the plethora of different place-based plans means they are all tripping over each other but you could make them cohesive at place and national levels.

We very much support having statutory targets. They do not have to be around everything. They could just be around access. We can see the



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benefit of a biodiversity target and a climate target but there is nothing for people and that makes urban the Cinderella of the environment movement across government and in turn means people's benefits and their health and wellbeing are not given priority, even though, as you have pointed out, the evidence is profoundly important.

We need a national strategy that would help lift at a local level and a target for government as a whole, across Departments, not just the planning system but, say, for transport, which does a lot for active travel. It is a cross-departmental thing.

Q139 Selaine Saxby: Alan, are you expecting future iterations of the framework or are you involved with other inter-governmental work that will tackle some of this?

Alan Law: The GI framework will continue to evolve with the standards coming out. Natural England is also involved in supporting DEFRA with a cross-departmental/cross-Whitehall group looking at the green-in-15 target. DEFRA also, I think at director general level, leads a cross-Whitehall group looking at EIP implementation and we will also support that. There are channels to achieve that join-up but, as we have both said, the level of spotlight on the green infrastructure is not as high as the benefits would suggest it ought to be.

Ellie Robinson: Can I add a couple of points, very important ones? When we were in the middle of Covid and were looking at the infrastructure that the nation needed primarily for levelling up, we commissioned a report on what it would take to level up the poorest areas of the country with access to green space. It was evident that if we were looking at green infrastructure in the same way we look at road, rail and broadband infrastructure, the return on investment is very high but we don't think about green infrastructure in the same terms. There is definitely a need for an upgrade in the current infrastructure so that it delivers the benefits and we shared the evidence with you. A £1 billion capital upgrade in the infrastructure would deliver £50 billion in health and wellbeing benefits and that does not even include all the climate benefits. There is something here about making sure that natural infrastructure is part of our infrastructure strategy for the nation and it is eligible for the big infrastructure.

I am thinking about the work that Plymouth does that Chris Avent was talking about earlier. It is very easy to get the money to plan a roundabout upgrade but that money is big—you could look after the parks in Plymouth for everyone forever for the same amount of money. However, nothing is supporting Plymouth Council to come up with a business case for that whereas the Department for Transport invests in the capacity building of local government so they can put forward investment cases for transport infrastructure. As you have heard before, capacity building in local government is vital for the successful uptake of the green infrastructure framework.



Chair: I am reliably informed that we are coming to wind-up shortly, so I think we should get the last two questions through before that happens. I think there are going to be a number of Divisions that will be very disruptive. Bearing that in mind, Dr Neil Hudson.

Q140 **Dr Hudson:** I want to touch on some of the new Government initiatives. The Government have introduced some other measures that could encourage the expansion of urban green infrastructure, including biodiversity net gain and local nature recovery strategies. Do you think it is clear how these policies will work together alongside the planning system?

Ellie Robinson: I think there is work to do to make that a cohesive package of plans. There is an opportunity to have a green infrastructure strategy at a place level that pulls everything together. Alan mentioned earlier that there is nothing to stop the local nature recovery strategy. It could have a very powerful urban chapter but currently it does not and it does not have any specific guidance. It would be good to have an urban template for LNRs, sponsored heavily by DEFRA, to make it much easier for urban parts of local government to be part of the LNR family. Also, the BNG metric does not allow for urban delivery. The way it is weighted risks undervaluing the people element. Alignment with the policies you already have could help achieve more benefits.

Q141 **Dr Hudson:** Further to that, Alan, what support or changes do you think are needed to ensure that these central policies can deliver the urban green spaces we want? What recommendations could we make to help them along?

Alan Law: Probably guidance, but there is no one size fits all on the ground. Local nature recovery strategies have the flex to provide a sort of higher-tier strategic plan for a broader interpretation of nature but that is not necessarily how they are being picked up everywhere across the country. It is certainly how Natural England will be trying to advise and engage with local government around the development of LNRs.

Q142 **Dr Hudson:** In that interaction with local government, what do you both think about central government leadership and co-ordination of this area? Do you have any recommendations for improvement if you think it needs to be improved?

Alan Law: That drive does rather fall between different Departments. DEFRA clearly leads on local nature recovery strategies; DLUHC leads on parks. Does the leadership have a cross-government/cross-departmental focus? Not sufficiently, I would say.

Q143 **Dr Hudson:** Coming back to the remit of this Committee, how specifically can DEFRA and Natural England drive the agenda?

Alan Law: I think what would help drive that agenda would be stronger targets and stronger timescales for those targets along with a statutory footing to them. That would certainly focus minds.



Q144 Dr Hudson: Some of the discussion earlier about the rural-urban interface was very interesting. We have talked about some of the public benefits of green spaces, whether for flood mitigation, improving air quality, the benefits for people's physical and mental wellbeing, but also, in that rural-urban interface the concept of increasing awareness about food production and the educational value of that. Is there anything that we as a Committee could recommend to harness those benefits and improve people's quality of life in rural and urban areas?

Ellie Robinson: There is a lot of scope. We have worked with you before on outdoor education and every child and young person having a direct experience of being outdoors, whether through something in their place or in the rural fringe. That is something that we think about a lot.

An important thing for parks and green spaces is how they can be the host for a lot of other social benefits, not only public services but other things communities need. Some of that is about reimagining how you can bring spaces to life so that they can do more. It could be growing food. We are currently working with some council departments thinking about providing outdoor education, youth services, and mental health services—there are so many things. Parks and green spaces could just be the host and backdrop, whether on the city fringe or near a city centre. Making parks and green spaces useful and valuable is the key to activating them.

Dr Hudson: Thank you. That is helpful. It goes back to what you were saying about the green belt, Chair, that there may be different ways of thinking about how we can reap their benefits.

Chair: Of course you can take a horse to water but you cannot make it drink. Having green spaces is one thing, getting people to use them is another thing. In my constituency, we have a lot of open space but most people do not go more than a couple of hundred metres from their cars, if that. Encouraging people is a challenge.

Q145 Ian Byrne: To finish up, a couple of recommendations from a funding perspective from both of your organisations. We have talked about this in advance and in both sessions and some of what Ellie Robinson said earlier was remarkable about the billion-pound investment and the outcomes. How do we protect the green spaces and ensure that we have the funding, green precepts, statutory duties? If we asked you for recommendations, what would they be?

Ellie Robinson: I think we have covered it but, in summary, I think we must lift our sights on what green infrastructure can bring to the country, repositioning green infrastructure as essential for our wellbeing and progress. A national strategy would bring government together and putting some of our existing targets—the 15-minute one and the 40% one—on a statutory footing or binding across the whole of government would help to at least align public spending and policies.



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A third recommendation from me is to allow local government a fighting chance to make the most of the green infrastructure they have, particularly in the communities that are poorly served. Where is the green infrastructure growth that the country needs? It is a job creator and we know that the health and wellbeing outcomes are profound.

Those are my three recommendations.

Alan Law: We can already see different mechanisms being used by different authorities to assemble funding to support green spaces. They are relatively small. Our view is that they are replicable and they are scalable. To have a drive behind them, they need a national spotlight and the clarity of government target and push behind them.

I wonder whether there is also a case for centralised public investment alongside private funding. I am thinking here about some of our models around the Nature for Climate Fund, which was brought in to drive investment across the country and, similarly, landscape recovery under ELMS, which is predicated on significant private funding alongside public investment. There is no equivalent for green infrastructure and yet arguably there is a comparable case.

Q146 **Ian Byrne:** They are very good points. Touching on the Future Parks Accelerator, what were the main learnings, Ellie, and how can they be applied more widely?

Ellie Robinson: Gosh, that is a big question. To start on a positive, I think if you invest in local government and its partners' capabilities to think long term, be bold and be brave, you get great results and there is a wealth of opportunity out there. There is a huge amount of energy in communities and in social enterprises. In the private sector, whether big employers in a place or those who have environmental social goal money, there are lots of people who want to invest in these outcomes. It is all to play for.

Ambition is key and capacity building is key. People cannot do these things on the edge of their desks—you heard that earlier. The collapse in the capacity of local government is not just about their budgets, it is also about the people. You have to put something in to get something out. Partnership is key because local government cannot do it on its own and the community sector cannot do it on its own either.

I think we have seen something very interesting come out of future parks about the power of partnership. It cuts across local government. We have seen public health lead the transformation of work. It has been brilliant. There is no magic bullet of a solution around funding but there has to be that blend, the public-private and philanthropic coming together. It is not that different from some of the rural stuff but I think there are some very acute pressures.



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Future parks was a kind of closed innovation programme. We are working with Natural England and Heritage Fund on a next-phase initiative, trying to think about some of the questions you have asked us: what gives people incentive; how could we help this next phase; how we can help galvanise a much greater groundswell of support? We are there, co-designing that initiative this year, but are trying to think about something that is much more inclusive of any place that wants to make progress.

Q147 **Ian Byrne:** Alan, would you like to add anything?

Alan Law: I have nothing to add to that. That was great.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed. That was quite an optimistic note to end on. It is always difficult when talking about local authority funding but there are many more sources of funding out there than just through the council taxpayers and central government support. Thank you very much indeed for your time.