



# Department for Environment Food & Rural Affairs

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Rt Hon Sir Robert Goodwill MP  
Chair, Environment, Food and  
Rural Affairs Committee  
*By email*

18 April 2024

Dear Sir Robert,

Thank you for your letter regarding the recent Urban Green Spaces inquiry you conducted.

The Government is firmly committed to improving the quality of and access to urban parks and green spaces for all sections of society. Parks and green spaces are an essential part of local social infrastructure which supports more connected, stronger communities. They provide places for social connection, support health and wellbeing, increase community engagement and volunteering, help people to connect with nature and can be a foundation for social capital which underpins local opportunity and prosperity.

In the Environmental Improvement Plan we made a wider commitment that everyone should live within a 15-minute walk of a green or blue space and to work to reduce other barriers which prevent people from accessing nature, such as physical challenges, lack of confidence and lack of information. We are the first government to make this commitment. This is a long term, whole of government commitment and we are working across departments and with stakeholders to deliver this. We are establishing a robust baseline by developing a new indicator which maps access to green and blue spaces based on walkability rather than straight line distance. Progress towards meeting the commitment is already underway, including through the initiatives outlined below.

In 2022 we launched the £9M Levelling Up Parks Fund to improve access to green spaces in disadvantaged neighbourhoods across the UK. Grants have been given to, and administered by, 85 eligible local authorities, to deliver new or improved green spaces in over 100 of the neighbourhoods most deprived of green space across UK. Data from Natural England and Office for National Statistics has been used to determine the eligible places by identifying the neighbourhoods where high deprivation coincides with poor green infrastructure. Interim findings show that 90% of funded local authorities reported increased access to green spaces in disadvantaged urban areas.

The Green Flag Award scheme owned by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities helps to increase access to quality green spaces, sets the standard for those spaces to meet the needs of the communities they serve. It has helped to transform thousands of parks and green spaces across the country.

Additionally, the £2.6 billion UK Shared Prosperity Fund is providing new funding for local investment. Local authorities can decide how to use funding to best serve their communities, including investing in improving and developing their parks.

The National Planning Policy Framework was amended in July 2021 to place a greater emphasis on beauty, place-making and good design, to create better places in which to live and work. The NPPF sets out that local planning authorities should produce their own local design codes and guides to provide clear expectations around design for new development in their areas.

The Framework is supported by our national design guidance, including the National Design Guide and National Model Design Code, which set out the ten characteristics for well-designed places and a tool for translating those characteristics into local design codes, respectively. Design codes can specify a range of different things including the layout of new development, facades of buildings, local character and materials, how new development should enhance health and well-being, biodiversity, landscape, and green infrastructure, as well as the environmental performance of places and buildings and their contribution to net zero targets.

### Tackling resources and funding issues and a national strategy for green spaces

The Government welcomes the findings of the Future Parks Accelerator and will consider them alongside the Committee's recommendations on recruitment challenges and funding. The Parliamentary Under Secretary of State (Levelling Up) in the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities has the responsibility for the Urban Parks policy. The final Local Government Finance Settlement for 2024-25 makes available up to £64.7 billion, an increase in Core Spending Power of up to £4.5 billion or 7.5% in cash terms on 2023-24. This above-inflation increase demonstrates how the Government stands behind councils up and down the country. The majority of the funding provided through the Settlement is un-ringfenced, in recognition of local authorities being best placed to understand local priorities. Local authorities decide how to spend funding locally and can choose from a wide range of interventions, which may include improving, designing and developing parks and green spaces.

The Urban Tree Challenge Fund (UTCf) is open for new applications and focuses on providing funding for new standard (large) trees in urban and peri-urban areas with high deprivation and low canopy cover; supporting the delivery of the social and environmental benefits of tree planting in towns and cities across England.

Additionally, the Local Authority Treescapes Fund supports the planting and maintenance of trees in urban areas, including beside roads and footpaths. The LATF is now open all year to Borough, District and City Councils, as well as County Councils, Unitary and Metropolitan Boroughs. The Fund provides capital funding to local authorities and their partners for planting and enhancing natural regeneration of non-woodland trees, where the treescape has become degraded.

On the proposal that subsidies for housebuilding should be used as much as possible, to require the creation of green spaces, we will not be taking forward this proposal at this time, but the Government does recognise the importance of green spaces, including the creation of new green spaces alongside new housing. Our approach to the planning system sets out how green infrastructure including open spaces should be planned for and set the framework for local decision making. Projects that receive Government subsidy, for instance through the Affordable Housing Programme, are subject to the same planning framework, and the delivery of green infrastructure in line with national and local policy will be a material consideration for decision makers when considering whether to permit a development. As the planning system allows for holistic decision making, taking into account all material considerations, this is the appropriate tool to drive place-making, including the delivery of green spaces. Many of the developments supported by the Levelling Up Home Building Fund will be regeneration schemes on urban brownfield sites. There is an amenity benefit associated with redeveloping these sites, both in terms of the removal of sometimes unattractive derelict sites and in terms of green space that is included within some of these schemes.

## Elevating the status of green infrastructure

The government does have a range of frameworks in place encouraging the provision of, and supporting, green infrastructure; at the same time, and respecting the pre-existing devolution settlement in the UK, local government must have agency and the space to determine how to best approach the needs of their particular area.

National Planning Policy is clear that planning policies and decisions should enable support for healthy lifestyles (for example, through the provision of green infrastructure), and that plans should take a strategic approach to maintaining and enhancing networks of green infrastructure. Our Planning Practice Guidance sets out how a strategic approach can be taken and how green infrastructure can be considered in planning decisions. The Levelling Up and Regeneration Act (2023) introduced provisions for National Development Management Policies (NDMPs) We intend to produce NDMPs, which we anticipate will include these principles, and which will have statutory weight in planning decision-making. National Development Management Policies will be consulted on prior to their introduction.

The Framework is supported by our national design guidance, including the National Design Guide and National Model Design Code, which set out the ten characteristics for well-designed places and a tool for translating those characteristics into local design codes, respectively. Drawing on the ten characteristics of the National Design Guide, design codes can specify a range of different things including the layout of new development, facades of buildings, local character and materials, how new development should enhance health and wellbeing, biodiversity, landscape, and green infrastructure, as well as the environmental performance of places and buildings and their contribution to net zero targets.

Both our National Design Guide and National Model Design Code should be used to inform planning decisions in the absence of local design guides and codes. These documents, as part of the wider suite of planning practice guidance, are kept under review and will be updated to reflect policy changes related to the natural environment.

Furthermore, through the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act 2023 we have introduced a requirement for all local planning authorities to produce design codes at the spatial scale of their authority's area. These will be backed-up by a reformed local plan-making system, which will help give greater weight to design codes in decision-making going forward.

National planning policy enables special protection against development for green areas of particular importance to local communities which can be achieved through Local Green Space designation. Local Green Space designation is for use in Local Plans and Neighbourhood Plans. To be designated, a green space must meet certain criteria, including being of reasonably close proximity and demonstrably special to the community it serves, and local in character.

Homes England's strategic plan sets out a mission to drive regeneration and housing delivery to create high-quality homes and thriving places. The provision of urban green space is very much part of that. Homes England actively encourages the usage of the Building with Nature standards as a tool to promote high quality green infrastructure. The standards can be applied at any stage of planning and development and define what high quality green infrastructure looks like.

Natural England launched the Green Infrastructure Framework: Principles and Standards for England in January 2023 and has had a very positive response. The Framework sets out what good looks like for local planning authorities, developers, parks and greenspace managers and communities, by setting 5 GI Standards, and providing an England-wide GI mapping database.

We welcome the Committee's acknowledgement of the utility of the Green Infrastructure Framework. This will be most useful (and, indeed, was deliberately designed) for planning authorities and developers when they are bringing forward new proposals – either through the local plan or through individual planning applications. This should mean, over the years ahead, that further progress is made. With regards to the Green Infrastructure Framework, the Government has not chosen to mandate this at this time – it is important that we allow local authorities the space to develop their own policies, and, from a first principles perspective, Government should not mandate everything. We would expect local authorities to develop plans to improve green spaces in their area.

On the suggestion that Government should consult on and set out a clearer set of responsibilities for green infrastructure within the developer or construction industry; we will not be taking forward this proposal at this time; local planning authorities are able to use developer contributions, including s106 planning obligations and the Community Infrastructure Levy, to secure contributions towards the ongoing maintenance of green infrastructure. The Competition and Market Authority Market Study into housebuilding also raised the issue of maintenance costs of public amenities on private housing estates, and the Government is currently considering this matter.

We have implemented a biodiversity net gain requirement for major development, which ensures greater protection for urban green spaces.

Updates are planned to further improve the framework, mapping and guidance. Natural England will be publishing more detailed guidance on the tree canopy standard and urban nature recovery standard, updates to the GI mapping database in 2024. We are also moving forward on the development of an urban landscape accreditation as set out in the EIP, currently testing the approach in 6 towns and cities- Natural England have delivered training to 30 local authorities with more planned for next year.

We'd like to take this time to reassure you that we are committed to ensuring that opportunities for enhancing and uplifting urban green spaces are considered in policymaking throughout government.

Yours sincerely,



**REBECCA POW MP**  
**Co-signed by Jacob Young MP and Lee Rowley MP**