

## Written evidence submitted by Dr Julian Dobson (UGS0031)

### Environmental wellbeing and the case for urban green spaces

*Submission to the House of Commons Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, October 2023*

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#### **Summary**

This submission considers the evidence for the benefits of urban green spaces and some of the risks to those benefits resulting from the continuing failure to resource their adequate care. It argues for a comprehensive approach to environmental wellbeing, taking into account both human wellbeing and the welfare of the wider natural world. Recognising the interconnections between human and non-human species, and between green and built urban environments, it makes a case for consistent and complementary policies to promote urban liveability.

#### **Introduction**

I am responding to the Committee's call for evidence on urban green spaces. I am doing so in my role as a senior research fellow at the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research (CRESR) at Sheffield Hallam University<sup>1</sup>, where this is one of my main research interests. My work there builds on research and reporting on related issues over more than two decades, as well as a longstanding interest in the quality and inclusivity of towns and cities in the UK.

I have been closely involved in a range of studies relating to parks and green spaces, including evaluation of the Future Parks Accelerator programme; evaluation of the national Green Social Prescribing pilot programme led by DEFRA and NHS England; and research on the benefits of public spaces in addressing health inequalities (Health Foundation, 2019-20). I previously submitted evidence to inquiries on public parks convened by the House of Commons Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee. CRESR is a leading UK centre for applied policy research and evaluation. For over thirty years we have undertaken critical, theoretical and empirical research into key regional, social and economic patterns within the UK and internationally, influencing policy design.

This submission addresses the questions posed by the Committee as a whole, rather than taking each aspect in turn. It does not attempt to be comprehensive but points towards some key sources of evidence. Its aim is to offer an approach to the challenges of urban greenspace provision that provides conceptual clarity and a clear rationale for policy and action.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.shu.ac.uk/centre-regional-economic-social-research>

The submission is presented in four stages. First, I suggest ‘environmental wellbeing’ as a way of framing the benefits and challenges of the urban environment, and green and blue spaces in particular. Second, I turn briefly to some current evidence on the benefits of urban green spaces and the associated natural environment in the UK. Third, I present some of the evidence on the current state of urban green spaces. Finally, I consider the role of government (both central and local) and the need for a consistent and complementary suite of policies to promote urban liveability.

## **Environmental wellbeing**

It is increasingly evident that the rupture between human wellbeing and the welfare of the natural environment has brought devastating consequences, especially in terms of climate change and biodiversity loss. While the rapid industrialisation and urbanisation of the last 200 years has brought numerous benefits to humans, we have now reached a point where ‘planetary boundaries’<sup>2</sup> for safe and sustainable living are rapidly being exceeded. In 2023 six of nine ecological limits had been breached, compared with three in 2009, and the overall picture is one of continuing rapid deterioration<sup>3</sup>. This requires a comprehensive approach to human and non-human wellbeing that can be applied at the local as well as global scales. The Committee’s inquiry speaks to this need to consider the local within regional and global environmental contexts.

A concept of ‘environmental wellbeing’ that takes into account the wellbeing of human and non-human species at any chosen scale can help us understand policies in terms of their contribution to an overall goal of human and non-human flourishing. Urban green spaces are a key contributing factor, providing numerous benefits and mitigating many of the harms associated with modern urban life. But they cannot be considered in isolation from the wider urban environment. So, for example, a park that cannot be accessed by local people without having to cross a busy road will not provide the same wellbeing benefits as it would if measures to calm the flow of traffic and ease pedestrian access were also implemented. A green space used only as a football pitch will offer benefits to a limited number of humans and very few non-human species. So the green space must be considered in relation to its functionality, diversity and surroundings.

There is currently no standard definition of environmental wellbeing. However, multiple studies have highlighted the importance of the local natural and urban environment in its impacts on physical and mental health. Urban green spaces are an important element within a complex set of interacting factors that affect both human health and the health of other species that share the urban environment. Carnegie UK Trust has argued that environmental wellbeing is one of four aspects of ‘collective wellbeing’ within communities – the others being social, economic and democratic wellbeing<sup>4</sup>. Building on Carnegie’s work, North of Tyne Combined Authority produced a local wellbeing framework which framed

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<sup>2</sup> Rockström, J. et al. (2023). Safe and just Earth system boundaries. *Nature* 619: 102-111.  
<https://www.nature.com/articles/s41586-023-06083-8#citeas>

<sup>3</sup> Richardson, K., et al. (2023). Earth beyond six of nine planetary boundaries. *Science Advances* 9:37.  
<https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/sciadv.adh2458>

<sup>4</sup> <https://carnegieuktrust.org.uk/wellbeing/>

environmental wellbeing in two ways: first, that all (communities, businesses and governments) have a shared responsibility for tackling the climate crisis; and second, that all should have access to a good quality local environment and live in neighbourhoods free from pollution and other environmental problems<sup>5</sup>.

CRESR was commissioned to review the Carnegie UK framework in 2023, drawing on the most recent and relevant academic evidence. Our work (to be published shortly) highlights three aspects of environmental wellbeing that are relevant to the committee's inquiry. First, environmental wellbeing is closely connected with local quality of life and liveability, including access to the natural world, the quality of local green spaces, and distribution of environmental harms such as noise and pollution, which tend to be worse in less affluent areas. Environmental wellbeing is thus closely associated with environmental justice – the distribution of the risks and benefits associated with environmental conditions. Second, our review reinforced existing studies highlighting the multiple benefits of green and blue spaces (blue spaces being those close to water), not only for the physical and mental health of human beings but also for the other species that share urban spaces. Third, we found a number of studies on the impacts of pro- and anti-environmental behaviours, highlighting the positive or negative links between people's experience of the urban milieu and their participation in activities that improve it (such as conservation volunteering) or degrade it (for example, by contributing to noise pollution or high energy consumption).

In relation to the questions posed by the Committee, the key takeaway from our research is that environmental wellbeing needs to be considered both holistically and equitably. Benefits are gained and sustained when policies work in concert to promote a high quality, liveable local environment; and when they take into account and seek to redress imbalances in the distribution of environmental goods and harms. The provision and quality of urban green spaces forms an important pillar of environmental wellbeing, but should not be considered in isolation.

### **The benefits of urban green spaces**

In 2022 CRESR and the Department of Landscape Architecture at the University of Sheffield submitted evidence to the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee's inquiry into public parks<sup>6</sup> and the points made there remain valid. As we told members of your sister committee, the Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of public parks and green spaces as a:

- vital local amenity
- key public health asset
- source of mental wellbeing in stressful times.

Evidence from the pandemic shows the importance of green spaces for mental health, socialising, exercise and connecting with nature,<sup>7 8</sup> reinforcing an already comprehensive

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.northoftyne-ca.gov.uk/what-we-do/projects/education-inclusion-and-skills/roundtable-on-wellbeing/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/109585/pdf/>

<sup>7</sup> Dobson, J. et al. (2021). Paradise regained? Localised and limited nature connexions in the UK's COVID-19

evidence base. A recent evidence review of nearly 400 academic studies<sup>9</sup> shows six social functions of public parks and green and blue spaces:

- **Physical health, mental wellbeing and life satisfaction are all enhanced through access to and use of parks and green spaces.** The way parks are used is as important as how easy it is to get to them. People need parks and green spaces nearby, but they need to be of a sufficient quality to encourage regular visits. Visiting parks can help address policy priorities such as reducing obesity, diabetes and heart disease. Visits to green spaces support mental wellbeing and stress relief. The quality of green spaces has a stronger bearing on health outcomes than quantity.
- **Parks and green spaces enable people to connect with nature, which in turn brings benefits in terms of wellbeing.** Nature connectedness includes experiencing the natural world through the physical senses, learning about it, and engaging mindfully with nature by noticing and paying attention. Feeling connected to the natural world helps people recover from stress and mental illness. Connections with nature also help to build a sense of place and community and foster a sense of gratitude and self-worth.
- **Parks create important opportunities for social integration.** They play an important role in helping refugees and migrants establish a sense of belonging in new communities. But they can also amplify social divisions: groups may exclude themselves from green spaces if they feel the space is dominated by one particular group of users or if they feel unsafe.
- **Parks provide opportunities for community engagement and local residents value the chance to be involved in designing and improving their green spaces** (e.g. through volunteering). For example, community gardening offers opportunities for new residents to build social connections; and children appreciate the chance to have their say on park improvements.
- **Parks and green spaces highlight inequalities in society.** There is evidence that the quality of parks and green spaces is worse in areas of lower income. Minorities are often marginalised in terms of access to green space, in addition to the other areas of discrimination they face.
- **There are economic benefits of parks and green spaces** in terms of creating employment, hosting economic activities (such as cafes or events) and encouraging inward investment.

Of these, the evidence for physical and mental health benefits, socialising and volunteering, and connecting with nature is most robust. This underlines the vital public health and wellbeing role that green spaces provide, in addition to their role in supporting the vital ecosystem services such as urban cooling, flood management, and pollination that are foundational to the quality of human and non-human life in urban areas<sup>10</sup>.

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lockdown. *Frontiers in Sustainable Cities*, 23 December 2021. <https://doi.org/10.3389/frsc.2021.708209>

<sup>8</sup> Dempsey, N. and Dobson, J. (2021). Planning for sociable green spaces after COVID-19. *Town Planning Review* 92:2, 171-179. <https://www.liverpooluniversitypress.co.uk/doi/10.3828/tpr.2020.84>

<sup>9</sup> Dobson, J. et al. (2019). *Space to thrive: A rapid evidence review of the benefits of parks and green spaces for people and communities*. National Lottery Heritage Fund.

[https://www.heritagefund.org.uk/sites/default/files/media/attachments/Space%20to%20thrive\\_2019-A%20rapid%20evidence%20review%2014102019-a11y.pdf](https://www.heritagefund.org.uk/sites/default/files/media/attachments/Space%20to%20thrive_2019-A%20rapid%20evidence%20review%2014102019-a11y.pdf)

Recent work at the University of Sheffield highlighted the importance of small and everyday spaces in terms of building connections with nature and supporting mental wellbeing. Environmental wellbeing is not only a matter of investing in well-known and popular public parks, but also depends on the quality, variety and accessibility of numerous ordinary spaces where people can find respite from the stresses of urban life<sup>11</sup>.

In terms of the wellbeing of the wider natural world, urban public parks and green and blue spaces are increasingly recognised as essential infrastructure in the context of a climate and biodiversity emergency<sup>12</sup>. But investment has not yet followed this recognition. Early assessments of Biodiversity Net Gain policies, which are predicated on a principle of offsetting the immediate loss of amenity in one location with the promise of future amenity in another, or by improving the quality of smaller residual sites, suggest that the policy is not preventing the loss of open green spaces<sup>13</sup>.

However, there is increasing understanding of the value of urban green spaces across a wide range of policy agendas and a growing recognition of this value within local authorities. There have been some welcome moves towards more joined-up approaches to greenspace policy and practice – notably through the Environment Act 2021 and the Dasgupta review of the economics of biodiversity<sup>14</sup> – although, as I discuss below, the current UK Government has demonstrated little commitment to maintaining this progress or rectifying the damage done by previous policies.

### **Risks and vulnerabilities**

Despite successive short-term interventions by central and local government, the National Lottery Heritage Fund and other non-government organisations, a fundamental issue of underinvestment remains. This is closely linked with the defunding of local government since 2010, resulting in a system described by both the Institute of Fiscal Studies<sup>15</sup> and the National Audit Office<sup>16</sup> as unsustainable. Because the upkeep of parks and green spaces is not a statutory service, it is inevitable that when savings are required green spaces are less likely to be protected. And because the costs associated with statutory services such as social care are continuing to rise in response to increasing needs<sup>17</sup>, the squeeze on services such as parks and countryside maintenance is likely to continue. These arguments have been well rehearsed in numerous policy fora over recent years but the overall deterioration continues. The government's position for more than a decade from 2010, given the pre-

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<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Pulighe, G. et al. (2016). Insights and opportunities from mapping ecosystem services or urban green spaces and potentials in planning. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecoser.2016.09.004>

<sup>11</sup> Dobson, J. et al. (2021). The magic of the mundane: The vulnerable web of connections between urban nature and wellbeing. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2020.102989>

<sup>12</sup> Mell, I. et al. (2023). Definitions and context of blue-green infrastructure. <https://www.icevirtuallibrary.com/doi/full/10.1680/icembgi.65420.003>

<sup>13</sup> Zu Ermgassen, S. et al. (2021). Exploring the ecological outcomes of mandatory biodiversity net gain using evidence from early-adopter jurisdictions in England. *Conservation Letters*, <https://doi.org/10.1111/conl.12820>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/final-report-the-economics-of-biodiversity-the-dasgupta-review>

<sup>15</sup> <https://ifs.org.uk/articles/present-model-funding-local-government-unsustainable>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.nao.org.uk/reports/financial-sustainability-of-local-authorities-visualisation-update/>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.health.org.uk/publications/long-reads/adult-social-care-funding-presures>

existing knowledge of the value of green spaces and the impact of underfunding in the 1980s and 1990s, can be summed up as a stance of conscious neglect: knowing what was required, government chose not to do it.

The Levelling Up Parks Fund illustrates the inadequacy and short-termism of current policy responses. The £9m promised for parks in 100 neighbourhoods<sup>18</sup> must be set in the context of an overall shortfall in funding that was put at around £1bn in 2018 by an alliance of greenspace organisations who called for a 'Parks Charter'<sup>19</sup>. In 2021 APSE (the Association for Public Services Excellence) calculated that a further £190m had been lost from parks budgets since 2016, and reported that the condition of the majority of parks was either at a standstill or declining<sup>20</sup>. A continuing reliance on small, ring-fenced and time-limited funding pots may offer an appearance of action, but does not begin to address the need.

This failure to address investment challenges is significant because it results in the deterioration of local green spaces, which may become associated with crime, antisocial behaviour and littering, leading local people to avoid using them. This is a particular risk in areas that are more deprived or where residents may already feel vulnerable. Any target for increasing greenspace cover only makes sense if accompanied by a commitment, and resources, to care for those spaces so that their benefits to humans and non-humans are maximised.

At the same time we should recognise that the challenges of funding the upkeep of publicly accessible green spaces are compounded by the continuing impacts of the climate and biodiversity crises. This means that there are additional demands that require an adequately resourced response. The UK Natural Capital Urban Accounts, produced by the Office for National Statistics<sup>21</sup>, highlight both the economic value of urban green and blue spaces and the risks they currently face. In 2017 the health savings in terms of mitigating air pollution in urban areas in the UK were valued at £162.6m; the carbon removed by woodland in urban areas was valued at £89m; and the recreational value of urban nature was calculated as £2.5bn. These values are unlikely to be maintained if the spaces deteriorate in quality or are put at risk through asset disposals and development pressures.

In 2019, according to the ONS natural capital accounts, 53% of urban sites of special scientific interest were recorded as being in an unfavourable condition, with 1% destroyed or partly destroyed. The figure for Wales was 55% unfavourable, and 27% unfavourable in Scotland. Urban bird species have declined by 15% overall between 2005 and 2007, with some species in particular danger: swift colonies fell by nearly 60% between 1994 and 2017. This underlines the need to consider green spaces in the context of the whole urban environment; swifts, for example, are particularly dependent on the built environment for nesting spaces.

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<sup>18</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/levelling-up-parks-fund-prospectus/levelling-up-parks-fund-prospectus>

<sup>19</sup> <https://parkscharter.org.uk>

<sup>20</sup> <https://midlandsparksforum.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/State-of-UK-Public-Parks-2021.pdf>

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<https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/environmentalaccounts/bulletins/uknaturalcapital/urbanaccounts#:~:text=Urban%20areas%20represent%20an%20estimated,the%20total%20UK%20land%20area.>

Similarly, evidence presented to the House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee by Natural England in 2020 detailed the effects of spending cuts of 45% over the previous six years<sup>22</sup>. The result was that Natural England was hobbled in its ability to achieve its duties to look after protected sites, assist species recovery, and advise on land use planning. Despite more recent budget uplifts, damage has already been done and continues to be done. The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds has reported that Natural England is still, in 2023, operating on only 62% of its 2011 budget, despite cost increases and a growing biodiversity crisis. Similarly, only 43% of local nature conservation sites are in positive management – with more than half of local authorities no longer even collecting information about their status<sup>23</sup>. The Environment Agency’s ability to tackle pollution has likewise been diminished through defunding<sup>24</sup>: by 2020, the agency’s chair, Emma Howard Boyd, told ministers that vital environmental protection work had stopped or been reduced, with staff attending only the ‘most serious’ incidents<sup>25</sup>. While there was some increase in resources in the 2021 spending review, it is important to recognise that damage has already been done: the harms arising from the failure to adequately protect the environment increase the costs of future restoration.

Targets for desired proportions of urban greenspace, however well-intentioned, miss the interconnections between the natural and built environment that are characteristic of urban ecologies and need to be addressed comprehensively through planning, development, environmental and funding policies. Fields in Trust has calculated that 6.1m people in Great Britain do not have a park or green space within ten minutes’ walk of their home, so an increase in provision is clearly needed<sup>26</sup>. But it matters where and how that space is provided. A reductive focus on a numerical target carries no guarantee that the benefits associated with that target will be realised, even if the quantitative goal is achieved.

Our work in evaluating the Future Parks Accelerator programme (FPA)<sup>27</sup>, which supported local authorities in eight areas to rethink the funding and management of their green spaces, highlighted that there are no straightforward solutions to the funding challenges. After observing this programme in action for three years, we concluded that while local authorities are best placed to take responsibility for the long-term care and development of green spaces, they continue to face challenges to resource that care. Raising additional resources through non-traditional means requires an upfront investment of time and energy. To achieve this requires capacity in terms of leadership, partnership building and systemic thinking. While FPA was able to provide this resourcing role in its funded locations, a more comprehensive approach would be required for this to happen at any significant scale. This begs the question of whether it would not be simpler to fund local government

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<sup>22</sup> <https://committees.parliament.uk/work/448/biodiversity-and-ecosystems/news/127536/natural-england-finance-squeezed-by-government-making-biodiversity-protection-challenging/>

<sup>23</sup> <https://community.rspb.org.uk/ourwork/b/rspb-england/posts/knowplace>

<sup>24</sup> Hansard, 17 November 2022. Environment Agency: Enforcement Budget.

<sup>25</sup> <https://theenvironmentpractice.co.uk/blog/the-ea-warns-that-budget-cuts-are-impeding-its-ability-to-enforce>

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.fieldsintrust.org/News/green-space-index-finds-more-access-to-local-parks-required>

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.shu.ac.uk/centre-regional-economic-social-research/publications/future-parks-accelerator-evaluation-final-report>

directly and invest in the professional and technical capacities required to care for green spaces for the longer term.

As major urban authorities such as Birmingham and Nottingham declare effective bankruptcy, the prospects for the care and improvement of their green spaces become even more fragile, despite significant efforts by local voluntary and community organisations to plug the gaps.

### **What government can do**

Central and local government need to work together to maximise the benefits of urban green spaces. This demands an understanding of their functions and benefits, coupled with a comprehensive approach to planning and policymaking; sustained resourcing rather than piecemeal initiatives; and a focus on environmental justice.

First, urban green spaces need to be considered as a key element of urban ecologies that also include the built environment. Non-human species do not recognise the lines on maps drawn by policymakers. Recent proposals to relax pollution controls for housebuilding demonstrate a continuing failure to consider the urban environment as a whole. Car-dependent new-build housing schemes with limited green space and extensive tarmacked or paved areas degrade urban ecologies, as do current proposals to limit or remove low-traffic neighbourhoods.

Second, government should move away from the current ad-hoc and scattergun approach to greenspace funding and policymaking. The natural environment needs to be fully factored into all urban planning, transport and development policies so that environmental improvements and restored habitats are included in situ. Current biodiversity net gain rules risk becoming as liable to gaming and greenwashing as carbon offsetting has proved.

Third, an environmental justice approach recognises that environmental goods and harms are unequally shared. Investment and action needs to prioritise the locations where access is lowest and needs are greatest. As part of the Future Parks Accelerator programme, Birmingham City Council developed an environmental justice framework for investing in the city's public parks and green spaces, based on an assessment of social and environmental factors and providing a clear logic for investment<sup>28</sup>. However, this is potentially at risk because of the city's current financial situation. The principles developed in Birmingham should be incorporated into national planning policies, while recognising that they require sustained resourcing over the long term.

There is thus a need to reconsider greenspace funding at a national scale. While the government has consistently baulked at calls to make the provision of public parks a statutory duty, sustained and adequate ring-fenced support is required to enable local authorities to preserve and enhance the natural environment in their localities – both within and beyond designated green spaces. This role needs to be viewed as a partnership between local and national government, because climate change and biodiversity loss

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<sup>28</sup> <https://naturallybirmingham.org/environmental-justice/>



transcend boundaries. It is only by working together, matching policy goals with sufficient resources and capacity to achieve the desired aims, and by adequately resourcing complementary government agencies such as the Environment Agency and Natural England (and their equivalents in Scotland, Wales and NI) that the continuing degradation of the urban natural environment will be addressed and reversed.