

Written evidence - Dr Ian Mell & Dr Meredith Whitten (PTC0021)

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has illustrated the significant value placed on green and open spaces (hereafter GOS) by individuals, communities and government. However, the use, quality and quantity of available GOS varies dramatically across England as a result of complex planning, ownership and funding issues. Consequently, access to GOS is inequitable in many towns and cities. Low-income, high-density and diverse ethnic communalities are most vulnerable to such inequality due to an ongoing, and potentially systematic, limitations placed on the management of local environments.

Since mid-2020, a series of reports^{1,2,3} have been released that detail the impacts of COVID-19 on health, well-being and the use of GOS. These reports outlined a significant inequality in access to GOS in core cities and towns outside of these twelve locations, and access to places of sufficient quality located near homes. Consequently, issues of equity have arisen as simple examinations of location of GOS have been superseded by discussions of the type and quality of available GOS, how it is spatially distributed, what functions and amenities it delivers (and to whom), and how people can physically and socially access these spaces⁴

A series of prominent issues have been identified within the academic and practitioner research over the last 18 months addressing the issues raised by COVID-19. These can be broken down into the smaller, but key areas outlined below to illustrate the relationship between government funding for local government and, by association, GOS, contemporary issues associated with planning for GOS in urban areas, and historical understandings of access related to income, age and ethnicity. The following six sections outline the key

¹ Public Health England. Improving Access to Greenspace A New Review for 2020. 2020. Available online: <https://beyondgreenspace.net/2020/07/29/improving-access-to-greenspace-a-new-review-for-2020/> (accessed on 3 December 2020).

² Local Government Association. Financial Impact of COVID-19 on Parks 2020–2021—Case Study Key Findings, Local Government Association Webpages. 2020. Available online: <https://www.local.gov.uk/financial-impact-covid-19-parks-2020-21-case-study-key-findings> (accessed on 3 November 2020).

³ Natural England. The People and Nature Survey for England: Adult Data Y1Q1 (April–June 2020) (Experimental Statistics). 2020. Available online: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-people-and-nature-survey-for-england-adult-data-y1q1-april-june-2020-experimental-statistics/the-people-and-nature-survey-for-england-adult-data-y1q1-april-june-2020-experimental-statistics> (accessed on 3 November 2020).

⁴ Mell & Whitten, Access to Nature in a Post Covid-19 World: Opportunities for Green Infrastructure Financing, Distribution and Equitability in Urban Planning. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 2021, 18(4), 1527; <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18041527>

arguments linking GOS with reactions and future responses to COVID-19, and are followed by a series of recommendations to the committee focussed as redressing the long-term impact of change in funding and management.

(1) Disproportionate reductions in funding for GOS

Since 2010, local government in England has enacted austerity financial management on the level and quality of social, educational and environment services. Discretionary, or non-statutory, services have been disproportionately affected in this process⁵. This has directly impacted upon the funding allocated to GOS and the financial provision made available to support the maintenance of parks, which are not a statutory provision, and health and well-being services. The impact of this has been:

- (a) Reconfiguration of management budgets leading to more limited servicing, decreased maintenance of GOS and lowering of their quality;
- (b) A growing considerations of alternative funding models and an increased discussions of asset transfers, Park Trusts, and land sales by local government;
- (c) Increasing dependence on commercialisation of GOS, which can be highly vulnerable to external threats, as COVID-19 illustrated;
- (d) Significant decreases in staffing for GOS/parks management and a substantial loss of expertise from local government as staff are made redundant, opt to retire or move to alternative employment;
- (e) An unwillingness to adopt new GOS within housing/urban development as part of S106/CIL requirements due to ongoing revenue costs that are not budgeted into local government financial models;
- (f) Increased pressure being placed on local government to generate income via the allowance/approval of development, although their ability to require S106/CIL/commuted sums from developers to support payments for GOS is limited;
- (g) Linked to (f), ongoing contestations and legal challenges from developers regarding requirements to provide capital/revenue funding for GOS, meaning that whilst populations increase and GOS are used more frequently, investment in them is lacking, and the provision of GOS has not kept pace with population growth and development (in terms of proportion or m² per person).

The result of this has been a significant decrease in the level, capacity and quality of management of GOS. These limitations have been placed on parks and GOS managers as a result of austerity meaning decreased maintenance is not a

⁵ Communities & Local Government Select Committee, 2019, Local government finance and the 2019 Spending Review, <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmcomloc/2036/203605.htm#footnote-158>

choice that those professionals would normally make. During the lockdowns of 2020, these impacts were particularly felt by communities with limited access to gardens or private spaces, as parks and other GOS were the only locations available to exercise or engage in mental well-being activities, including combatting loneliness⁶. Disparities were therefore evident in all cities where choices were made regarding what to manage, and to what extent⁷.

Green Flag parks were maintained to ensure their status as well managed/high-quality sites was retained, whilst other less prestigious sites may have been downgraded in terms of management. Moreover, outside of the core cities there is a greater financial threat to the management of GOS, as these spaces often do not hold the same visibility or commercial value as in other places⁸. They also are subject to differing funding mechanisms, meaning that there is a greater resilience to financing GOS in London or Manchester compared to Blackburn or Ipswich⁹. Second tier cities and towns may thus have lost a higher proportion of their core grant and have been required to seek a greater proportion of finances elsewhere from public and private investment and/or funding streams¹⁰.

(2) Greater variability of urban/economic prosperity, therefore limiting the development and inclusion of quality GOS

Across Britain, the most severe local service spending cuts between 2010 and 2017 generally occurred within areas of “multiple deprivation”¹¹. Funding cuts have been larger in more-deprived council areas than more affluent ones¹². This has led to “intensifying territorial injustice” between areas. More deprived areas also are less likely to have proximate high-quality, accessible GOS. The pandemic highlighted how these inequalities in a distribution of and access to GOS have been exacerbated.

⁶ Local Government Association (2020) Loneliness, social isolation and COVID-19
<https://local.gov.uk/publications/loneliness-social-isolation-and-covid-19>

⁷ Mell, IC. (2020) The impact of austerity on funding green infrastructure: A DPSIR evaluation of the Liverpool Green & Open Space Review (LG&OSR), UK. *Land Use Policy*, 91, 104284,
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landusepol.2019.104284>

⁸ Norris, C. & Bertontin, C. (2021) People need parks (and parks need people)
<https://www.nesta.org.uk/project-updates/people-need-parks-and-parks-need-people/>

⁹ Parkinson, S. (2019) Volunteers help out as Blackpool parks budget slashed.
<https://www.blackpoolgazette.co.uk/news/volunteers-help-out-blackpool-parks-budget-slashed-964745>

¹⁰ Ipswich Borough Council (2021) £25 million Town Deal Funding Announced for Ipswich
<https://www.ipswich.gov.uk/content/%C2%A325-million-town-deal-funding-announced-ipswich>

¹¹ Gray, M. and Barford, A. (2018). The depths of the cuts: the uneven geography of local government austerity. *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society*, 11(3), pp. 541–563,
<https://doi.org/10.1093/cjres/rsy019>

¹² Phillips, D., Amin-Smith, N. and Simpson, P. (2019). Written evidence submitted by the Institute for Fiscal Studies, Communities & Local Government Select Committee,
<http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/housing-communities-and-local-government-committee/local-government-finance-and-the-2019-spending-review/written/100092.pdf>

Having quality GOS nearby creates a positive impact on the local economy, including by increasing footfall to local businesses¹³. At the same time, proximate GOS can increase housing values, which can lead to some residents being priced out of their neighbourhoods. However, due to the historical wealth (and funding to support growth) concentrated in England's core cities there is a visible disparity in the number and proportion of GOS in each place. For example Liverpool¹⁴ has a series of established Victorian parks surrounding the city centre whereas Blackburn has fewer space of equal size, quality or functionality. The economic heritage of a city can therefore be seen to have promoted a more liveable and green environment. Thus, towns and cities that do not support national/international commercial activity, i.e. those in central Lancashire, the Midlands or south-west are potential more limited in terms of their GOS provision.

(3) Lack of investment in public services leading to a lack of GOS (%/m²) per capita (and variable quality and functionality)

The lack of legal requirements to deliver GOS in all development has led to difficulties in community use of GOS during the pandemic. For example, the lack of GOS requirements in new flats/apartments, as developers look to maximise the economic value of the spatial footprint of a site, has significantly affected quality of life and place. There is extensive evidence of the health benefits of viewing and interaction with GOS, which has not been integrated into a significant proportion of development¹⁵. As a consequence, cities have higher populations with lower overall proportions of GOS per person. As populations continue to grow, per-capita GOS falls all the more. Comparable examples can be seen in urban extension and new housing estates where developers maximise units over quality of life/place due to the inflated land value market¹⁶. The lack of a legal requirement to fund environmental improvements and management has therefore come to the forefront of debates regarding access to GOS during the COVID-19 pandemic.

¹³ Groundwork (2021). Out of bounds: equity in access to urban nature, <https://www.groundwork.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Out-of-Bounds-equity-in-access-to-urban-nature.pdf>.

¹⁴ Liverpool City Council (2016) Liverpool Green & Open Space Review, Final Report. Liverpool City Council, Liverpool.

¹⁵ Lovell, R., White, M.P., Wheeler, B., Taylor, T., Elliott, L. (2020) A rapid scoping review of health and wellbeing evidence for the Green Infrastructure Standards. European Centre for Environment and Human Health, University of Exeter Medical School. For: Natural England, Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Public Health England, and Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government, England.

¹⁶ This remains linked to central government mandates of the "housing crisis" in the UK, the systematic rhetoric of home ownership, and the promotion of a pro-development/developer mandate to boost the UL economy via new builds. All of which has placed a premium on floor space and units per acre rather than the quality of place for health, well-being, climate change adaptation or biodiversity – issues noted by Defra and Natural England as key development principles.

Secondly, due to the financial issues noted in point (1) above, local government has lost a significant proportion of its expertise in land management. Thus, the ability to action/implement management plans and to develop multi-functional GOS for all members of society has been compromised. This has been exacerbated via the limited availability of activities within GOS, including play parks, sports facilities, ParkRun, as well as more general mowing and landscaping that may limit use for people with mobility issues. The contraction of management has, therefore, compromised the multi-functional nature of some sites, which have been subject to only basic maintenance. Local government has, thus, been forced into making difficult decisions regarding the management of GOS: do they manage it less intensely or do they find ways to outsource/release the assets from their control? In practice this leads to:

- (a) GOS of lower quality;
- (b) A decreased perception of quality in local communities leading to decreased use;
- (c) Potential sales of land or subcontracting of management leading to a decreased service and a decreased level of quality in management.

Both outcomes have impacted upon the ways in which GOS have been managed throughout the pandemic, which in turn has limited the accessibility and use of GOS by large sections of society. The lack of investment in GOS has therefore placed significant constraints on local governments' ability to provide (and manage) a portfolio of high-quality spaces that meet the diverse needs of local communities.

A further element of this discussion is the disparity in investment, development and funding across England. The emphasis¹⁷ placed on regional hubs, i.e., Bristol, Birmingham or Newcastle, as well as the concentration of growth in London and the South-East, has skewed the financial power of smaller towns and cities, limiting their development income. Despite the calls to 'level up' England and the UK via the 'Build back better' mandate, concerns remain that the centralisation of development in a select number of areas limits the ability of smaller cities and towns to generate income to manage their urban environments and GOS effectively. Calls for GOS to be at the centre of the UK's recovery to Covid-19 therefore need to be integrated into government thinking¹⁸

(4) Difficulties and variation in access based on distance, time and size/functionality metrics

¹⁷ Core Cities (2018) Core Cities UK 2030. Global Success, Local Prosperity, Core Cities, London.

¹⁸ Geary, RS., Wheeler, B., Lovell, R., Jepson, R., hunter, R. & Rodgers, S. (201) A call to action: Improving urban green space to reduce health inequalities exacerbated by Covid-19. Preventative Medicine. 145, 106425, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ypmed.2021.106425>

Although there is an ongoing use of the Accessible Natural Greenspace Standards (ANGSt)¹⁹ and a promotion of the Fields in Trust 10-minute distance metrics in measuring access, there are issues with their use. Within a consideration of access to GOS during COVID-19, communities have been asked to stay local and use their immediate spaces. Consequently, in areas ill-served by GOS in terms of overall proportion (%) of an urban footprint or m² per person, this places limitations on individuals, and thus potentially hinders their health and well-being. Moreover, where smaller GOS dominate, there is a problem with the carrying capacity of these sites. As more people started to use them, conflicts were reported in the media of users being unsatisfied with the (a) number of patrons, (b) their behaviour/activities, and (c) a lack of respect in terms of managing GOS, i.e. leaving litter. In many urban areas, the lack of sufficient variety in GOS, i.e. in terms of the number of sites, the size of these sites individually and collectively, and the amenities/functions they afford to different communities, limits use²⁰. This has been exacerbated by Covid-19, as parks and GOS have been some of the only places people have been advised they can visit²¹.

A second issue associated with access focusses on equity. Significant numbers of people have been unable to access high-quality GOS due to the ways in which the urban form has been planned and managed. Areas of high-density housing, i.e. flats/apartments or housing estates, areas with homes of multiple occupancy, and areas surrounded/structured around built infrastructure including transport links/roads all suffer from inequitable access. Inner city areas and post-industrial cities and towns in Greater London, the Midlands and the north-west are particularly relevant in terms of their characteristics. This is due to:

- (a) The increased number of people using GOS, thus lowering the %/m² per person and leading to overuse or use beyond the capacity of a site;
- (b) A limited integration of GOS in the design of flats/apartments and their environs, and the limited quality and quantity of GOS located with housing estates;
- (c) A need in urban planning to provide transport, housing, service and economic infrastructure to meet central and local government targets,

¹⁹ ANGSt remains a useful tool to assess the spatial footprint of GOS in an area. However, its straight line/buffer zone application does not adequately address issues such as street hierarchies, mobility, access points or amenity value. Moreover, size metrics lack a qualification of functionality or socio-economic/environmental quality. Thus, bigger or a larger proportion of GOS does not necessarily mean greater use or value if the site lacks high quality maintenance. The Fields in Trust 10-minute walking distance is a more refined measure as it addresses some of the spatial issues of ANGSt but again does not consider quality/functionality.

²⁰ BBC Online (2021) Covid: 'Don't blow it' says health secretary as thousands gather in sunshine, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-56588196>

²¹ Mell, I. (2020) Coronavirus: urban parks can be a lifeline if we respect lockdown rules <https://www.manchester.ac.uk/discover/news/coronavirus-urban-parks/>

- thus limiting the ability of Local Planning Authorities to plan for and demand higher proportions of GOS in development; and
- (d) A lack of sufficient funding to ensure effective and high-quality GOS in high-density or in ethnically/economically diverse areas.

The ongoing work of Defra and Natural England regarding the National GI Standard and the research undertaken on ANGSt, Woodland Access Schemes and Quality/Quantity within this process should be used to guide this thinking. Whilst ANGSt remains a useful tool for Local Authorities to assess access, it does not necessarily provide the granular level of local/household data needed to examine how the immediate environment has been used during the COVID-19 pandemic.

(5) Lack of awareness of access rights

A further area of consideration is the way in which different communities (potentially structured by BAME, gender or age characteristics) are aware of their rights to use GOS. This can be extended to include notions of safety and acceptance in public spaces. There is a wealth of evidence within the academic and practitioner literature stating that BAME communities feel less welcome and have a lower level of awareness of access rights to GOS. This can be associated with a lack of GOS near to homes with the Runnymede Trust stating that up to 90% of some communities having limited access to GOS. Moreover, at the Local Super Output Area (LSOA) level deprivation is highlighted to be linked with lower levels of GOS²². Therefore, if your community has a deficiency of GOS (or has a higher proportion of low-quality spaces) then you may modify your behaviour and not use parks or green spaces.

Moreover, in communities with variable levels of social segregation, i.e. Belfast or parts of South London, we can identify community barriers to use related to identify, perceived access rights and safety issues. Research in Belfast²³ has found that some GOS are considered dangerous because of their geographical location in Catholic or Protestant areas. Whilst areas of South London are associated with specific social groups or a visible presence of the police thus making the areas unwelcoming to all members of society. Within the last 18-months these barriers have been visible in shaping behaviour and in many cases limiting the ways in which people use GOS. It thus requires more extensive outreach and community engagement to facilitate use and a long-term stewardship of spaces, as seen recently in Burgess Park in Peckham²⁴. The growth of specific BAME groups such as Black Girls Hike UK²⁵ illustrates a

²² Collier, B. (2020) The race factor in access to green space.

<https://www.runnymedetrust.org/blog/the-race-factor-in-access-to-green-space>

²³ Lang, L. & Mell, I. (2020) 'I stick to this side of the park': Parks as shared spaces in contemporary Belfast. *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space*, 3(2), 503-526.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/2514848620918829>

²⁴ <https://www.friendsofburgesspark.org.uk/revitalisation/>

potential shift in awareness of access rights to nature and GOS but this remains limited in some communities.

(6) Variability in house stock, density and urban form and its impact on quality of life/place

While in general people value access to nature, residents of urban areas value GOS more than others²⁶. In 2018-19, visits to green spaces in towns and cities comprised 52% of all visits to the natural environment, an increase of 11 percentage points from 2009-10²⁷. Yet, GOS in urban areas are more vulnerable to development and overuse pressures.

Planning policy that priorities the country's housing shortage over all other services should be seen as exacerbating unequal provision of and access to GOS. For example, permitted development rights intended to quickly deliver housing by allowing for the conversion of office space to residential use without being subject to the planning process are not subject to requirements for access to open or amenity space, including GOS²⁸. Only 3.5% of such permitted development units had access to private amenity space, compared to 23.1% of homes that had been subjected to planning requirements²⁹. Housing delivered through permitted development is eight times more likely to be located in a primarily commercial or industrial area, which typically lacks GOS.

The perceived view is that via ongoing planning reform that such transformations of buildings to residential property will increase, especially in urban areas. However, the lack of permissions needed to enact such change will place excessive strains on GOS and other social services. Particular scrutiny is therefore needed to ensure that services are not oversubscribed and that GOS can manage the number of patrons using them. Within the Covid-19 lockdowns we have seen the value of GOS to those in high-density areas, which might be compromised should large-scale conversion of commercial infrastructure be allowed. This the mistakes of limited access to and the limited provision of GOS may get worse if urban density is allowed to increase without a level of oversight from local government and planners³⁰.

²⁵ <https://www.bghuk.com/>

²⁶ Fields in Trust (2019). Revaluing Parks and Green Spaces, <http://www.fieldsintrust.org/revaluing>.

²⁷ Natural England (2019), 'Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment – The national survey on people and the natural environment. Headline report 2019,' <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/monitor-of-engagement-with-the-natural-environment-headline-report-and-technical-reports-2018-to-2019>

²⁸ Mell & Whitten, Access to Nature in a Post Covid-19 World: Opportunities for Green Infrastructure Financing, Distribution and Equitability in Urban Planning. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 2021, 18(4), 1527; <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18041527>

²⁹ Clifford, B.; Canales, P.; Ferm, J.; Livingstone, N.; Lord, A.; Dunning, R. Research into the Quality Standard of Homes Delivered through Change of Use Permitted Development Rights; Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government: London, UK, 2020.

Recommendations

To address the ongoing issues of access, equitability and functionality/quality issues witnessed during the Covid-19 pandemic we recommend a series of sweeping changes to the ways in which GOS is funded and managed. These require leadership from central government to place public health and well-being at the centre of policy and to allocate financial and legal support accordingly.

- (1) Develop legislation that explicitly allocates a proportion of UK government funding via its core grants to cities to manage GOS as high-quality public assets.
- (2) Provide the framework for Local Authorities to leverage a specific proportion of Council Tax to fund GOS similar to payments for the emergency services.
- (3) Require all new development to provide a minimum proportion of GOS and set out a programme of revenue for the maintenance of these new spaces.
- (4) Provide financial support for Local Authorities in high-density, low-income and ethnically diverse locations to work with communities to identify locations for new GOS. The funding allocated should be used to consult, design and develop new GOS with other funding as noted in (3) above to cover maintenance.
- (5) Provide easier pathways for NHS and other health and well-being organisations to support maintenance of GOS to support healthier living campaigns.
- (6) Declare GOS an “**essential infrastructure**”, embed it in national infrastructure plans, and allocate funding accordingly. This needs to go beyond large-scale projects, i.e. the Northern Forest, and allocate GOS the same level of necessity as roads.

6 July 2021

³⁰ Lucas, C. (2020) Planning reform must protect green spaces, not give a blank cheque to developers
<https://www.politicshome.com/thehouse/article/planning-reform-must-protect-green-spaces-not-give-a-blank-cheque-to-developers>