

Written evidence - Groundwork UK (PTC0024)

About Groundwork

Groundwork is a federation of charities mobilising practical action on poverty and the environment. Throughout our 40-year history we have been working with communities to create better places to live, delivering practical responses to environmental injustice and health inequalities and improving economic opportunity and social infrastructure. Our work has been focused in areas experiencing multiple disadvantage, many of which have been hardest hit by the health and economic impacts of the pandemic. We are working closely with local authorities and other stakeholders around the UK to develop programmes and deliver services that contribute to community renewal, levelling up and the regeneration of town centres. Given the breadth of this work and the broad scope of this enquiry, we have chosen to focus our evidence on two specific areas where we can see the pandemic has had particularly marked impacts both on the quality of life in local communities and on the work that we have been delivering: green spaces and the energy efficiency of housing.

1. What is the long-term impact of the pandemic likely to be on housing and green spaces in towns and cities?

- 1.1. **Green spaces.** At some points during lockdown, parks and green spaces were among the only places the public were permitted to visit for leisure or exercise. As the restrictions were eased, parks and green spaces were the first places that we were permitted to meet with friends and family. As a result, these spaces have played an increasingly important role in many people's lives and at the centre of communities. There has been increasing recognition of the importance of access to nature to support health and wellbeing and as a vital form of social infrastructure.
- 1.2. Green space managers have reported an increase in numbers using these spaces during the pandemic, creating pressure on facilities and staff. Issues with crowds and littering have been well documented. Managing the pressure on our existing green infrastructure will be a significant challenge in the coming months given that local authority budgets for green space management have been declining for the last decade, and in the longer-term.¹ it is likely that these pressures will increase. Analysis by Fields in Trust and the Co-op found that by 2040 the amount of green space provision per person will have reduced by 7.6% and over the next five years alone there will be a 6.5% increase in the number of people not living within a ten-minute walk of a park or green space, to nearly 2.87 million.²
- 1.3. Not everyone has been able to access the benefits created by parks and green spaces. During the pandemic, inequalities in access to green space have been exacerbated. Many people have been spending more time in parks and green spaces, particularly people who have been working from

¹ Association for Public Service Excellence (2017), 'Redefining neighbourhoods: A future beyond austerity?' <https://www.apse.org.uk/apse/index.cfm/research/current-research-programme/redefining-neighbourhoods-beyond-austerity/>

² Fields in Trust & The Co-op (2020), 'Green Space Index: Looking to the Future' <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/83b164ac89d14890a7004772da10ada4>

home and more dependent on the facilities in their immediate local area. Others have had less access to natural spaces because of needing to shield, pandemic related pressures on their time, and reduced access to public transport.³ Groundwork's recent *Out of Bounds* report found that many demographic groups experience complex barriers to accessing parks and green spaces, relating to accessibility, relevance, and feeling safe and welcomed.⁴

- 1.4. **Housing.** During the pandemic, many people have spent more time in their homes and experienced higher energy costs as a result. Coupled with the economic impact of the pandemic and associated lockdowns on many households, this is likely to have an impact on levels of fuel poverty this winter and into the future. Housing is closely linked to risk of catching and becoming seriously ill with Covid-19: larger households with higher density occupation and/or poor ventilation have seen higher rates of transmission during the pandemic, while living in a cold home is known to put individuals more at risk from respiratory illnesses.⁵
- 1.5. Groundwork works with households at risk of fuel poverty through our Green Doctor home energy efficiency programmes. Green Doctors are expert members of staff who spend time with householders, helping them to reduce their bills by changing energy tariffs, accessing benefits, and take small measures to conserve energy and water in their homes. During the pandemic, Green Doctors have switched from home visits to providing remote support over the phone. Despite these new ways of working, Green Doctors have reported that they are seeing increasingly complex cases, with people who had never previously struggled to pay their energy bills experiencing fuel poverty for the first time and many households which were already struggling falling further into debt. Research from Citizens Advice found that 2.1 million households were behind on their energy bills in September 2020, 600,000 more than in February that year.⁶
- 1.6. In the longer-term, more people are likely to need support making decisions about energy use in their home. To meet the government's climate change commitments, we will need to decarbonise our housing stock rapidly and shift away from gas as the primary fuel to heat our homes. The economic effects of the pandemic on some households and local areas are likely to mean they are less able to engage with this process and additional support will be needed to ensure that no-one is left behind in the transition.

³ Office for National Statistics (2021), 'How has lockdown changed our relationship with nature?' <https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/environmentalaccounts/articles/howhaslockdownchangedourrelationshipwithnature/2021-04-26>

⁴ Groundwork UK (2021), 'Out of Bounds: equity in access to urban nature' www.groundwork.org.uk/outofbounds

⁵ Public Health England (2014), 'Local action on health inequalities: Fuel poverty and cold home-related health problems' https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/357409/Review7_Fuel_poverty_health_inequalities.pdf

⁶ Citizens Advice (2020), 'Covid drives over half a million people into the red on energy bills' <https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/about-us/about-us1/media/press-releases/covid-drives-over-half-a-million-people-into-the-red-on-energy-bills/>

2. How might this increase, or decrease, inequalities within towns and cities?

2.1. Groundwork's recent *Out of Bounds* report explored the evidence on inequalities in access to green space in our towns and cities. The report included evidence on why this inequality matters. Of course, it matters for its own sake as everyone has the right to fair and equal access to public space and people place a high value on access to nature. However, access to high quality green space is also associated with a wide range of benefits, including:

- strengthening the local economy;
- improving mental and physical health and wellbeing;
- increasing opportunities for socialising and community cohesion;
- improved local environment;
- increased resilience to climate change.⁷

If inequality in access to green and natural spaces is not addressed, we risk increasing inequalities within towns and cities in each of these areas. The connections with the economy and health are particularly important given that the pandemic has already had a significant effect on local economies and health inequalities.

2.2. Increased levels of fuel poverty are also likely to exacerbate health inequalities, putting people more at risk from seasonal flu and other viruses, including any potential future pandemics.

3. How might this increase, or decrease, inequalities between towns and cities?

3.1. Some local areas have recognised the value of green spaces and taken steps to protect them. For example, Liverpool City Council has recently passed a motion to protect all its parks in perpetuity.⁸ However, pressure on local authority funding has made it challenging for many local areas to give parks and green spaces the priority and investment they need. Reductions in funding for parks services have been especially marked in more deprived local authority areas.⁹

3.2. Differences in governance structures across the UK may exacerbate these inequalities. For example, feedback from parks managers suggests that budget reductions for the management of green infrastructure have been most significant in unitary local authority areas, particularly in more disadvantaged areas, due to the need to prioritise statutory duties. It is also clear that devolved governments and metro mayors can drive investment in green infrastructure which may not be available in other areas – the Mayor

⁷ The Parks Alliance (2020), 'Making Parks Count – The Case for Parks' <https://www.theparksalliance.org/making-parks-count-the-case-for-parks/>

⁸ Fields in Trust (2021) 'Liverpool City Council's pioneering commitment to protect all parks forever' <http://www.fieldsintrust.org/News/liverpool-city-council-pioneering-commitment-to-protect-all-parks-forever>

⁹ Association for Public Service Excellence (2017), 'Redefining neighbourhoods: A future beyond austerity?' <https://www.apse.org.uk/apse/index.cfm/research/current-research-programme/redefining-neighbourhoods-beyond-austerity/>

of London's Green Spaces Commission is a good example of this. To address this, it will be important to embed understanding of the benefits of providing access to green spaces in the way national institutions such as the NHS are run. Green social prescribing is in its infancy and the funds available for it do not currently support the provision of infrastructure, but the NHS itself has a significant 'green estate' that could be more effectively managed to address inequalities of access to green space.

4. What action is needed from the UK Government, town and cities leaders, and others to mitigate the risk of any increasing inequalities?

- 4.1. The long-term goal of policy around access to green spaces should be to create a more stable funding environment for green infrastructure, particularly in urban areas, and to ensure that the way we plan, develop, and manage green spaces protects the rights of everyone to have access to the public realm and helps those who would benefit most to connect with nature more often. This means encouraging and incentivising local authorities and other landowners to legally protect green spaces for public benefit, providing targeted support to address barriers to access for certain groups and bringing more nature into urban areas as part of programmes to regenerate town and city centres. Groundwork has recently published a short report looking looks at the important role town centres can play in regenerating urban areas and helping communities towards a green recovery.¹⁰
- 4.2. It also means investing in skills acquisition and job creation. The existing workforce engaged in land management in the UK is ageing and in need of diversification. Significant work has gone on to identify the skills needed in this sector in the future and there is now a window of opportunity to invest in the sector in a way that brings new ideas and energy into the vital task of managing green spaces to promote nature recovery and access to the outdoors for all.¹¹
- 4.3. Provision of high quality, accessible green space should also be prioritised in the planning reforms and new design codes. There are significant opportunities for the government to show leadership on this front, for example by recognising the importance of green spaces as part of its forthcoming Levelling Up white paper and bringing forward funding for green spaces in the spending review later this year.
- 4.4. Town and city leaders have a significant role to play in prioritising and protecting green space. They should incorporate plans for increasing access to nature into bids for regeneration funding such as the UK Community Renewal Fund and the Levelling Up Fund. They should work with other agencies (including public health, housing, and business improvement

¹⁰ Groundwork (2021), 'Regeneration and a green recovery', www.groundwork.org.uk/about-groundwork/reports/regenerationrecovery/

¹¹ Association for Public Service Excellence (2019), 'Nurturing skills for 21st century parks' [https://www.apse.org.uk/apse/assets/File/Parks%20report%207%20March%20-%20exec%20summary%20version\(1\).pdf](https://www.apse.org.uk/apse/assets/File/Parks%20report%207%20March%20-%20exec%20summary%20version(1).pdf)

districts) to ensure that the benefits created by green space are maximised and that all sections of the community are able to access them.

- 4.5. To ensure there is a long-term plan to support equal access to green space in towns and cities we would recommend the Committee ask government to review the terms of reference of the National Infrastructure Commission, which currently specifically exclude land management from its remit. Only when parks and green spaces are seen as part of our essential national infrastructure will they receive the support and funding needed for them to play their full part in reducing the financial burden on the NHS and contributing to our net zero target.
- 4.6. To support all the points above we would encourage the Committee to see how its recommendations might feed into the cross-government Commission being led by Lord Agnew on Access to the Outdoors.
- 4.7. The government should put in place a long-term strategy for decarbonising our housing stock and addressing fuel poverty. Attempts by successive governments to incentivise home energy efficiency through the provision of grants to homeowners have not succeeded (the most recent example being the Green Homes Grant scheme). This means there is an increased risk of leaving millions of people susceptible to ill-health or debt and an increased risk of failing to meet our national carbon reduction targets. A switch to intensive, area-based schemes will help to address this, concentrating support, focusing the provision of advice and guidance, and creating a 'norm' in communities which will increase take-up. This could then be matched with area-based funding to support the development of the SME supply chain, using schemes like Kickstart to increase capacity in line with demand.
- 4.8. In exploring how these challenges might be met, we would encourage the Committee to consider how the findings of the Government's Green Jobs Taskforce might be used to support this long-term change in the way our housing stock and green infrastructure are managed, both to tackle existing inequalities and to address the climate and nature emergencies.

5. How could the UK Government, town and cities leaders, and others use their response to the pandemic to reduce inequalities in housing and green spaces?

- 5.1. The UK government should make reducing inequalities in housing and green spaces central to its plans for the pandemic recovery. This should include focusing economic recovery packages on activities that will reduce inequalities. For example, Groundwork has been creating jobs for young people through the Kickstart scheme, with many roles focused on improving local green spaces. Conditions should be added to any future schemes to ensure that the jobs created have social or environmental benefits. Devolved mayors have a significant role in education and training strategies locally and could ensure that these strategies align with goals to reduce inequalities and equip people with the skills and qualifications needed to improve housing and green spaces.

- 5.2. The government should also make reducing inequalities in housing quality and access to green space a central part of regeneration funding (such as the UK Community Renewal Fund and the Levelling Up Fund) and part of the remit of the new UK Infrastructure Bank. This will help to maximise the social value created by this funding, alongside further funding brought forward through the comprehensive spending review.
- 5.3. Organisations like Groundwork can also play a role in reducing these inequalities as we respond to the pandemic. Groundwork is seeking to build on our existing work in the design, management and activation of parks and green spaces, addressing the inequalities identified through our recent report and contributing to nature recovery. We are also exploring ways to increase the impact of our work on fuel poverty and home energy efficiency, to help us reach more households and empower communities to reduce their carbon emissions.

6 July 2021