

Written evidence – The Land Trust (PTC0026)

Housing and green spaces

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

One of the very few positives of the terrible situation the world has faced over the last 15 months due to the Covid-19 pandemic, has been a greater appreciation and understanding of the importance of green spaces and the role they play within our communities and wider society.

The phrase 'green recovery' is one that has been used regularly as governments around the world continue to plan for how to get the world back on its feet following the devastation wreaked on it by the pandemic.

However it is actions that will speak louder than words. We have all had to suffer many restrictions on our everyday lives. We haven't been able to see friends or family, the vast majority of us have had to work from home, and we haven't been able to travel. While these restrictions have been frustrating and upsetting for many, the knock on effects for our environment have been positive.

Without the same rush and stresses of work many people have had more time to spend in green outdoor spaces. The Land Trust has seen this first-hand, with our parks and green spaces busier than ever over the last 12 months.

Being outside, surrounded by trees and nature, has played a hugely important role in helping people through the challenges of the last year and I think there is a real appetite from the general public to prioritise green spaces in all walks of life.

However with an ever expanding population the need for new, high quality housing in the UK has never been more acute.

Record numbers of homes are being built in the UK each year, though the numbers still fall well below Government targets. However the challenge with new developments is how to turn them into communities. For these developments to thrive the challenge is to turn houses into homes and neighbours into friends.

Looking at the future of housing in this country there is a key reason why developers and key decision makers should be choosing to prioritise green spaces that go beyond simply acquiring the planning permission they need to get the development approved.

A recent survey conducted by ULI United Kingdom and YouGov highlighted that incorporating parks and green spaces into new housing schemes was the number one factor that would help gain the support of the public.

That should provide all the impetus needed to focus minds of the people in charge. If the UK Government take this on board and act upon it they have a fantastic opportunity to improve the lives of millions of people in the future and

ensure that the long term impact of housing and green spaces post pandemic is a positive one.

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

Well managed green spaces make a really positive difference within towns and cities. They have positive effects on air pollution, resident's health and wellbeing and provide a myriad of other opportunities, as well as creating significant economic and social value for communities.

As the Land Trust moved into the residential service charge market in 2016, we wanted to understand the wider benefits that well managed green spaces can have on the communities that live and work nearby.

Working with Manchester Alliance Business School the Trust conducted some research around the impact of the green spaces at Port Sunlight River Park. The park is a former landfill in Wirral, and located by some of the most deprived neighbourhoods in the country.

In 2014 the Land Trust, working with the land owner Biffa Waste Services Ltd and other partners, transformed the site into a 30 hectare park and wetland, after securing £3.4 million of public and private investment for its creation and long term maintenance.

The research highlighted that good quality green spaces:

- Improve an area's attractiveness
- Increase property values
- Encourage local investment
- Generate local business revenue
- Create and safeguard jobs
- Enable volunteering, learning and development
- Protect homes and businesses from flood risk

The research found that the green spaces had a direct impact on property prices, with the greatest uplift being on homes within 500 metres.

- 5.4% increase in value every 100 metres that a house is closer to the park
- £7.8 million – estimated total value that the park adds to houses located within 500 metres.
- £8,674 – the average addition per house price within 500 metres of the park

The project also highlighted that people in the area are willing to pay up to £10,000 more for a house situated next to a park.

This project highlighted that there are benefits to everyone by prioritising green spaces within developments. The homeowners benefit from being able to use green spaces within walking distance of their home, while it also protects, and often enhances, the investment made in their property.

The creation of the country park at Port Sunlight has transformed a very deprived area into a thriving, inclusive community highlighting the role green spaces can play in successfully decreasing inequalities. However the project was successful because it had robust funding and a long-term plan for stewardship which ensured the country park could benefit the communities it serves for many years to come.

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

I'm not sure how to answer this question as it's very similar to the one above...

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

The UK government, town and cities leaders need a consistent joined up approach in order to mitigate the risk of any increasing inequalities. At the moment the approach is piecemeal and depending on individual city and their leader preferences.

For those of us who believe that green infrastructure should be the beating heart of all new housing developments and regeneration the 'Building Better Building Beautiful Commission' offered a real opportunity to change the way we operate in this country. When the report was published at the beginning of 2020 it was really encouraging to see the focus on regeneration and responsible stewardship. The recommendations in the report were ambitious but they needed to be. In the modern world new housing schemes need to be about so much more than simply bricks and mortar, and it appeared that the commission had really grasped that concept.

The report proposed a new development and planning framework which will:

- Ask for Beauty
- Refuse Ugliness
- Promote Stewardship

It states that 'our built environment and our natural environment belong together. Both should be protected and enhanced for the long-term benefit of the communities that depend on them. Settlements should be renewed, regenerated and cared for, and we should end the scandal of left-behind places, where derelict buildings and vandalised public spaces drive people away. New developments should be regenerative, enhancing their environment and adding to the health, sustainability and biodiversity of their context. For too long now we have been exploiting and spoiling our country. The time has come to enhance and care for it instead.'

Finally, it seemed, key decision makers had finally come to the conclusion that decades of overwhelming evidence had been pointing them towards: that green spaces are essential to the success of a place.

Unfortunately, though, the next stage of this work, the National Model Design Code, has rather missed the point. The enhanced focus on the importance of proper stewardship, and a holistic approach to the management of green spaces has been diluted.

The Land Trust recommends that the UK Government revisits the National Model Design Code and reverts back to the original principles of the 'Building Better Building Beautiful Commission' returning the focus to regeneration and responsible long term stewardship.

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?

In our view well managed green spaces are the single most important factor in the success of an area and the wider community. They provide a host of benefits; for people's health and wellbeing, creating economic and social value, delivering education and training opportunities, improving the environment and biodiversity and bring people and communities together.

The evidence around the benefits of green space are overwhelming. They create more pleasant places to live, improve physical and mental wellbeing and create relationships and build communities that last for decades to come.

There is a unique opportunity for the government to put policies in place to ensure that new developments and housing schemes prioritise responsible long term stewardship.

If it isn't prioritised now it feels like the opportunity could be lost forever and continued damage done to communities. It may not be as enticing as a shiny new development investment but it will provide longer lasting benefits.

It will also be important to consider the wider benefits provided by green spaces, not just think about them in the context of housing. For example we know that children and young people have been hugely affected by the pandemic with huge chunks of their education missed. Through our own research we know that many young people, who may have previously struggled with their education, can often achieve far more in an outdoor learning environment. However the key to this is having access to a suitable space, which not every child has, particularly in a school environment.

Having a green space near to where they live can therefore be hugely beneficial to a young person and should strengthen the case for making green infrastructure a key part of all new housing projects.

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