

## **Written evidence – Fields in Trust (PTC0034)**

### **Introduction to Organisation**

Fields in Trust is an independent charity with over 90 years' experience protecting parks and green spaces. We work with landowners, community groups and policymakers to champion the value of our parks and green spaces to achieve better protection for their future at both local and national level.

As recognised experts in the field we continue to develop a robust and credible evidence base about the value of parks and green spaces to people and communities in Towns and Cities, as well as providing insightful development tools that enable local decision-makers to make informed choices about where interventions can prevent further loss and inequity of parks and green spaces

### **Housing and Green Spaces**

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

During the pandemic there has been a fundamental shift in how we live, work and interact and as we gradually return to a revised version of normality there are many elements of our reframed lives that are likely to have continued relevance.

Parks and green spaces were one of the only places to provide respite from covid-19 restrictions resulting in significantly increased usage of these spaces and a new recognition of their value, Google mobility data shows the use of parks and public green spaces were up on previous years during summer 2020<sup>1</sup>.

They were central to our collective health and wellbeing during the pandemic providing opportunities not just to exercise and reflect but crucially providing local, shared spaces to meet with friends and family safely. Looking forward there are many new habits that were formed during the pandemic such as the relocation of social interactions - meeting friends for a coffee and a walk or hosting children's birthday parties - into local parks and green spaces that should be actively encouraged to continue. The shape of our daily working lives is not likely to return to a pre-pandemic state and as we adopt hybrid working models for the long-term people working from home are more likely to visit a park or local green space than those who travelled to work<sup>1</sup>.

And, ahead of COP26 in Glasgow later this year, it is more important than ever to recognising the capability of green spaces and the wider natural environment in boosting air quality, support habitats and mitigating the effects of climate change has never been stronger.

But alongside the wider recognition of the value of parks and green spaces the pandemic also highlighted how many communities have much less access to good quality green space than others reinforcing inequalities even further in

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<sup>1</sup> Google – COVID-19 Community Mobility Reports, Natural England – Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment

more challenged areas. Lower socio-economic groups, BAME communities and urban residents all ascribe a significantly higher value<sup>2</sup> than the average to parks and green spaces and therefore a lack of access to parks disproportionately impacts disadvantaged and underrepresented communities. In parallel the social capital that is invested in many parks and green spaces by volunteers is likely to be significantly reduced in more challenged areas further underscoring these inequalities. For parks and green spaces to provide the health and wellbeing benefits that are so well evidenced in a fair and equitable way in the future then access to local, good quality green space needs to be seen as a social justice issue and a core part of any levelling up agenda. As the new APPG on Left Behind Neighbourhood report<sup>3</sup> demonstrates, public assets such as parks are disproportionately absent in the poorest wards and they are least likely to receive government investment to create or improve them.

The long-term impact of the pandemic on green spaces should undoubtedly be that this greater currency results in civic leadership to protect their future but at present there is little evidence to support that action being taken. Across the UK only 6% of parks and green spaces are legally protected and without intervention that picture will only worsen. Placemaking-centred policy recognises the role of parks in creating inclusive and desirable communities but interventions are needed to support local leaders to strengthen and legally protect these valuable assets. Unless we recognise the role of parks in a new and reimagined way we will continue to see a battle for funding to deliver this service in a meaningful way at a time when the very existence of parks will be competing with development needs. New planning reforms and the need to build new houses will threaten the local pockets of green space that people have relied on during the pandemic and the potential conflict between these two competing agendas needs to be recognised and positively addressed through the healthy placemaking agenda

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

We know that access to green space varies within individual towns and cities and that even when locations meet the benchmark standard of provision it is unlikely that provision is equally distributed with poorer communities and those with higher levels of ethnic diversity typically having less access to good quality green space.

The pressure on local authority budgets as we recover from the pandemic risks widening this gap on both the quantity and crucially the quality of provision available to communities. Faced with an impossible funding challenge councils may be forced to make short term decisions about which green space to prioritise and often that leads to continued investment in the flagship parks that

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<sup>2</sup> Revaluing Parks and Green Spaces: Measuring the Economic and Wellbeing Value to individuals, 2018, Fields in Trust

<sup>3</sup> 'Left behind' Neighbourhoods: Community Data Dive, 2021

are invested in rather than smaller local spaces. Evidence shows that there are many real and perceived barriers to certain demographics using green spaces and whilst some of these doorstep spaces may not have all the facilities of the larger city parks, they are accessible and familiar to groups who would not otherwise be deriving the benefits visiting parks and green spaces can bring. To tackle some of these inequalities we need to recognise the intrinsic value of these spaces and invest in them appropriately.

Fields in Trust's recent work with both Liverpool City Council and the City of Edinburgh Council demonstrates a progressive approach from both authorities to ensure an equitable approach to the protection of green space assets. By taking a city-wide approach to parks and green spaces and considering the sphere of influence of each space they have identified swathes of green space to protect to maximise the proportion of residents within a 10-minute walk of a protected park or green space. Decisions have not been predicated on facilities or usage but on the proximity of green space to communities and the need to future proof this local access. The parks and green spaces that will be protected through this partnership will vary in shape, size and offering but as part of their recovery from the pandemic both cities recognise that the most intrinsic value of these spaces is in their very existence and that protecting this in perpetuity is part of enabling what those spaces can contribute to the mitigation of climate change, to health and wellbeing, to job opportunities and to communities in the future.

Where this city-wide approach is not possible we would advocate that an evidence based approach to identifying where the poorest level of green space provision and protection intersects with the communities who have most to gain from using these spaces should be adopted to enable local authorities prioritise the parks and green spaces that can help reduce these inequalities. Fields in Trust's Green Space Index and supporting data model can support local authorities to take a robust approach to this decision making and avoid a cycle of reinvestment in areas where there may be arguably less need

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

Provision and access to green space varies significantly from place to place with 4 out of 9 regions of the country currently falling below the minimum recommended level provision<sup>4</sup> and over 90% of Major towns and cities in the UK (excluding the 12 core cities) fall below the recommended amount of local green space per 1000 people<sup>5</sup>.

Our annual Green Space Index analyses data on green space with population data to illustrate and inform the debate around revaluing parks and finds that 2.78 million people live further than a ten-minute walk from their nearest park or green space. Some parts of Britain have access to half the amount of green space as their neighbouring towns and cities and this continues to reinforce the

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<sup>4</sup> Fields in Trust, Green Space Index, 2021

<sup>5</sup> Fields in Trust, Guidance for Outdoor Sport and Play, 2015

health and wellbeing inequalities that are, according to the new report by Sr Michael Marmot, the single most significant factor in the bid to level up our communities. Our analysis also found that areas in the lowest 20th percentile of green space provision contains 10% more deprivation in its population and 9% more BAME in its population - precisely the communities who ascribe a higher value than the average to parks and green spaces

#### **4. 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 needs to use this opportunity to set out a bold and aspirational vision for parks to sit at the heart of communities helping to deliver on agendas ranging from health and wellbeing to climate change mitigation to green jobs, active travel and social cohesion. Parks should be seen as a vehicle to drive investment into the local economy as part of positive placemaking rather than an afterthought that is underfunded and undervalued.

There is a raft of opportunities on the current legislative agenda that can help to reduce these ongoing inequalities by putting good green infrastructure in the centre of place-making and place keeping. But too often the connections between agendas are not being made and the opportunities to embed parks and green spaces as crucial social infrastructure are being missed.

Our analysis of population growth over the next 20 years identifies where these inequalities and gaps in green space provision will widen further still, and that is even without any further loss of green space. Along with other interventions the upcoming new Green Infrastructure Standards Framework should be mandated in Planning Guidance with accompanying tools to arm local authorities with the necessary information to make cross policy and strategy decisions about the quantity, quality and future-proofing of local parks and green spaces. Action should be focussed on driving improvements in quality green space provision and the benefits that directly relate to people's quality of life, health and environmental needs, and importantly the key steps in planning, creating and maintaining green spaces for future generations.

#### **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?**

The park was a sanctuary during the coronavirus lockdowns as a place to play, exercise, relax and reflect. This recent video captures local people's daily experiences of using parks and what those local parks mean to their health and wellbeing <https://youtu.be/o4taJW1PinY>. People like Eric, a frontline NHS worker who relies on the local park as his only accessible outdoor space; somewhere to exercise on the outdoor gym and destress after a long shift. Or Natalie at home with a new baby and unable to access peer support who would go to her local park to connect with other young families. And here is the point - these individuals are the faces and the stories behind the grand policy ambitions and statistical analyses. Genuine levelling-up is measured in the wellbeing impact on

the lives of Eric, of Natalie and their countless neighbours across the UK. We know that green spaces are good, they do good - and for our community health and wellbeing - they need to be protected for good

The revaluing of local parks and green spaces along with their legal protection in perpetuity can play a pivotal role in the Government's levelling-up agenda. Fields in Trust has pioneered a data driven approach to provide solutions in locations where equity of access to parks and the derivation of benefits from them is most at risk. This will provide a solid foundation for future planning and funding decisions.

Parks will be a powerful part of our recovery from the crisis, helping to create stronger, more connected, healthier communities. There is a real moment in time to revalue parks that recognises the need to collectively come together, to involve and consult people on local Placemaking that results in a stronger, sustainable and more equal future for communities.

The MHCLG Select Committee Inquiry into Parks and Green Spaces in 2017 advocated the need for cross departmental working to join together the multiplicity of agendas that these spaces are relevant to achieving – a relevance that has increased exponentially in the intervening years as a result of the pandemic, the widening gulf of inequalities and the ever-increasing threat of climate change. As a sector we are yet to see any real progress to achieving that cross departmental approach that ends the myopic view of parks and green spaces as a non-statutory service and reimagines them through the lens of long term, critical social infrastructure with the power to impact positively in a raft of ways. UK Government can act decisively and instructionally to change this status quo and bring Health, Environment, Education and Business into the tent with MHCLG to create a different future.

*6 July 2021*