Blue Sky Green Space

Understanding the importance of **retaining good quality parks and green spaces**, and the contribution they make to **improving people's lives**

GreenLINK

Executive summary

Where we are now

The new coalition government is creating a very different landscape for public service delivery with significant reduction in public expenditure and a fundamental shift to local decision making. We are entering a new era where local services will be more accountable to local people.

The contribution green space services make to improving the outcomes for local people; health and wellbeing, the local economy, stronger more engaged communities and a greater sense of satisfaction with where people live welcomes honest judgement and comparison.

The green sector is open to finding and adopting new ways of working across traditional service and administrative boundaries, working in different delivery arrangements, in trusts and social enterprises and with private, voluntary and third sector partners. It is both the vanguard and catalyst for increased individual responsibility, community participation and civic commitment.

'Big Society' builds on and supports decades of existing commitment and effort within this sector where the value of community-led and community supported management has long been recognised.

Use

Over 33 million people in England choose to use their green spaces, with around a tenth of the population visiting daily, a third of the population visiting several times a week, and more than half the population visiting at least weekly. The total number of visits per year is estimated at between 2.5 and 3 billion. What can compare to this? Access to nature and green environments is as fundamental to human existence as the air we breathe and the food we eat, as essential to civilised modern society as education and health care.

Satisfaction with where we live

Green infrastructure adds to the quality of our urban built environment. The parks and green spaces in and around our towns and cities, improve the health, wellbeing and quality of life of individuals. Their place is at the heart of our communities, helping to make them stronger and safer and ensuring that the places in which we live and work are more sustainable and attractive. They inspire young and old alike, shaping our views on where we live and who we are, encouraging responsibility, self-worth, environmental stewardship and civic pride.

91% of people believe that public parks and open spaces improve their quality of life.

CABE 2004 Public Attitudes to Architecture and public Space: Transforming Neighbourhoods, by MORI unpublished)

'The more often a person visits urban open green spaces, the less often he or she will report stress-related illnesses.'

Landscape planning and stress, Urban Forestry and Urban Greening 2 (1): 1-18 Grahn, P. and Stigsdotter U.A. (2003)

Parks and green open spaces are both a highly valued and highly used feature of the built environment. Three out of four people visit a public greenspace at least once a month – more than a quarter do so at least three times a week.

Sustainable Development Indicators, Defra, 2007

'If parks and green spaces are well managed, research has shown that communities use their local spaces more, have better relationships with their local councils and take some pride in the area where they live.'

Urban Green Nation: Building the Evidence Base CABE Space (2010)

Communities: Big Society in action

People show their love of these places in more ways than just through their regular visits. Every year, well over half a million individual volunteers represented by thousands of community groups, working in tens of thousands of communities, give up their time freely and passionately. Whether helping to improve a council managed space or, looking after community managed land, created by local communities, for local communities, volunteering empowers local people to take more control of their environment and gives them opportunities to become more active in their community. These people lead by example, and positively influence and change the behaviour of others. Green space volunteering is often the catalyst for wider participation, the development of community leaders and wider community improvement.

The economic value of their work is around £30 million per annum, the social return on investment at least four times that much, the true value to society immeasurable. You only need to watch how communities galvanise around these spaces to protect them at the slightest hint of a threat, or come together to reclaim derelict land and transform it into a space for play or a place for growing food, to gain an understanding of their true value to communities.

People who participate in cultural activities are 20% more likely to know 'many people' in their neighbourhood. Recreation promotes positive contact between different ethnic groups and opens communication in a non-threatening atmosphere. Providing a means for social interaction that can help to break down the barriers of unfamiliarity, fear and isolation.

Health and Wellbeing

There are worrying trends relating to the nation's health. Obesity and less active lifestyles have led to an increase in preventable diseases which are placing increasing pressures on the National Health Service. Around 8% of annual deaths in Europe (at least one in 13) have been attributed to overweight and obesity.

Green spaces provide a wealth of opportunities for exercise and sport. Evidence shows a brisk walk every day, in a local green space, can reduce the risk of heart attacks by 50%, strokes by 50%, diabetes by 50%, fracture of the femur by 30%, colon cancer by 30%, breast cancer by 30% and Alzheimer's by 25%. Add to this the impact of exposure to nature and green space on stress and mental health, on aggression and violence within inner city communities and on ADHD amongst children and the full picture in relation to health and wellbeing and access to green space can start to be understood.

For example, the increasing interest in community food growing provides big returns on health and nutrition, learning about where food comes from, improved community resources and reduced food miles. More land is now needed to meet this demand.

It is estimated there are around 5,000 city farms, community gardens, allotment sites, school farms, orchards and related groups in the UK, engaging with as many as five million people a year.

Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens

'It is a measure of peoples' commitment to green spaces and belief in their importance that there are so many examples of communities working together to transform their local space. The acts of improving, renewing or even saving a park can build extraordinary levels of social capital in a neighbourhood.'

Philadelphia Parks Alliance, (2008)

'Over 50% of us visit a park at least once a week, to improve physical - and mental - health, to enhance our closest relationships, to chill out, to interact with our communities and to have a good time.'

People, Places and their green spaces Keep Britain Tidy (2010)

'Where people have good access to green space they are 24% more likely to be physically active, those who live furthest away from parks and green spaces are 27% more likely to be overweight or obese.'

Technical Information Note TIN055, an estimate of the economic and health value and cost effectiveness of the expanded WHI scheme: Natural England (2009)

In England there are health inequalities between the rich and poor, with mortality rates higher amongst the poor. Good access to parks and green spaces reduces these inequalities with mortality rates caused by the diseases most commonly associated with poverty reduced by up to 30%. However, people living in deprived inner city areas have five times fewer parks and good quality green space available to them and 70% of BAME communities in England live in many of the most deprived areas in the country; this could be described as a tragedy of national proportion.

Environment

Over 90% of the UK population live in cities. Urban green space represents 14% of the urban landmass and the quality of life available to urban populations largely depends on this 14%. Air quality, air temperature, water and flood management, are all kept within manageable limits because of parks and green spaces. They are the most fundamental components of any credible strategy for mitigation and adaptation of climate change. They provide the ecosystem services that sustain biodiversity and human life.

By fostering community leaders through volunteering opportunities in our urban green infrastructure we can influence a greater awareness of the wider environment. There are openings for partnerships between small enterprises, local authorities and communities to model new initiatives; managing landscapes for environmental and economic stability. By improving urban and rural landscapes we can deliver environmental benefits that support a more sustainable future.

Economy

The economic value of urban green space systems within our towns and cities is already vast. Replacing their environmental contribution with engineered alternatives would cost many billions of pounds and would be neither environmentally or financially sustainable.

The health benefits green spaces bring directly impact on some of the largest areas of NHS expenditure. The cost to the UK economy of overweight and obesity was estimated at £15.8 billion per year in 2007 and less active lifestyles have led to an increase in preventable diseases which cost the NHS £8.2 billion annually.

Locally, there are direct links between the quality of a city's green spaces and its ability to support local economies and businesses through employment, tourism and visitor spend.

However, there is scope for improved green infrastructures to contribute so much more, creating massive financial savings whilst also beautifying and enhancing the landscape of our towns and cities, creating recreational and educational opportunities, improving biodiversity, combatting climate change, and providing even greater health benefits for all.

"There are few public health initiatives that have greater potential for improving health and well-being than increasing the activity levels of the population of England."

Chief Medical Officer (2004)

'Philadelphia storm water management cost is 1.2 cents ($0.012) per cubic foot. In 2007, the park system, which reduced runoff by 496 million cubic feet, provided a storm water retention value of $5,949,000.'

Measuring the Economic Value of a City Park System: Trust for Public Land (2009)

'The majority of visits to the natural environment (75%) involve no expenditure. Of the estimated 709 million visits involving expenditure...the total spend by visitors to the natural environment between March 2009 and February 2010 is estimated to be £20.4 billion.'

Monitoring of Engagement with the Natural Environment: TNS Research International, commissioned by Natural England, Defra and Forestry Commission: (2010)

'The net economic impact of wildlife tourism in Scotland alone is £65 million, with 2,763 FTE jobs in existence because of the activities of wildlife tourism in Scotland. 1.12 million trips are made to or within Scotland for the primary purpose of viewing wildlife, resulting in a total spend of £276 million.

The Economic Impact of Wildlife Tourism in Scotland: Scottish Government Social Research, International Centre of Tourism and Hospitality Research Bournemouth University (2010)

The Future

High quality green space provides a very cost effective means of promoting health and wellbeing and supporting stronger and safer communities, through this and their impact on urban environmental quality they make an immense contribution to the local economy. Green spaces are one of the most reliable barometers of resident satisfaction. Imaginative use of green space provides an excellent Social Return on Investment whilst increasing individual and community engagement.

Retaining high quality standards and good access is the key to ensuring that green spaces deliver all of their beneficial outcomes for individuals, communities and places. Whilst high quality green space is amongst the most valuable and treasured of community assets, the converse is often true of neglected or derelict land.

Green space management, whether local authority or community based, has effectively delivered improved and widely beneficial outcomes for local people. Government recognition, influence and support are needed if those involved in green space management are to build on the success already achieved in creating a bigger and fairer society.

Responding to the challenges presented by localism and Big Society, the sector seeks to work with government to:

- Increase recognition of the unique contribution that high quality green space makes as a catalyst for community participation; and for improving health and well being, cultural integration, the environment and local economies.
- Ensure green space providers can best contribute to solving local problems through participation in the key local decision making partnerships.
- Ensure green space providers are properly represented when new local delivery arrangements are being developed.
- Increase recognition of the contribution that the third sector makes to green space management good practice and its potential to support the realisation of Big Society.
- Ensure communities have access to a range of diverse high quality green spaces.
- Develop a range of effective and sustainable green space management models that support community action and volunteering and partnerships between the private sector, Trusts, Social Enterprises the voluntary and community sector and local authorities.
- Encourage investment in the skills required to manage quality green space in a changing delivery environment.
- Position quality local green space provision at the heart of preventative health strategies and encourage health providers to acknowledge its value.
- Support the creation of a Community Land Bank to open up under-used land to community groups.

green space = village greens squares play areas
multi use games areas accessible countryside
city (urban) farms play areas skateboard parks
multi use games areas accessible countryside
nature reserves allotments community gardens

GreenLINK brings together, at a national level, organisations that are active in the parks and green space sector. Participating organisations include charities and trusts, social enterprises and other non-governmental bodies. GreenLINK provides an open forum where knowledge can be shared, duplication can be avoided and robust and effective responses to challenges that impact on the sector can be jointly developed. Government Agencies and non-departmental public bodies are welcome and regular observers, expanding access to information and resources and making useful connections across different government departments, agendas and initiatives.

GreenLINK is hosted by GreenSpace the national charity working to improve parks and green spaces by raising awareness, involving communities and creating skilled professionals.

GreenSpace
www.green-space.org.uk | Registered Charity No.1108803 | Company Reg No.03741111

urban forestry scrub grasslands downlands commons
meadows wetlands open & running water cycleways
river & canal banks rights of way tennis courts sports pitches
bowling greens golf courses athletics tracks churchyards
school & other playing fields outdoor sports areas squares
recreation spaces amenity space around housing plazas
domestic gardens tree lined streets village greens scrub
cemeteries urban parks country parks formal gardens
multi use games areas accessible countryside woodlands
city (urban) farms play areas skateboard parks downlands
wetlands multi use games areas accessible countryside
nature reserves cycleways allotments community gardens
urban parks country parks formal gardens green space =