

MAKING UP GROUND

The Role Of Green Infrastructure In Urban Regeneration

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Introduction

The UK is one of the most nature depleted countries in the world (Natural History Museum, 2021) and UK residents experience stark inequalities in access to nature (Groundwork UK, 2021). Over the past few years, policy makers have increasingly recognised this problem and the importance of addressing it if we're going to combat climate change and reduce health inequalities. The 25 Year Environment Plan and Nature Recovery Network have set out steps towards addressing the biodiversity crisis, bringing people closer to nature and, in the process, improving health and wellbeing.

However, the finance gap for nature-related outcomes identified in the government's own policies has been estimated as being at least **£44 billion** and possibly as much as **£97 billion** over the next decade (Green Finance Institute, 2021). Action for nature and the environment is not something that can be achieved in isolation and, despite the benefits it brings for people and local economies, nature recovery is still not mainstreamed in urban regeneration policy.

Under Boris Johnson, the flagship Levelling Up white paper set the direction for regeneration policy. Its focus on investing in areas described as 'left behind' acknowledges the regional inequalities within the UK as well as the inequalities between areas that are geographically close. Whatever direction Liz Truss chooses for this policy area, the need to improve the social, environmental, and economic infrastructure of places where people feel overlooked will remain. This report explores the role of green infrastructure in current UK regeneration policy and asks whether enough is being done to ensure that policies focused on place-based infrastructure are bringing nature into the heart of our communities.



Why green infrastructure?

Green infrastructure is a network of multi-functional green space and other green features which can deliver quality of life and environmental benefits for communities. It incorporates a wide range of spaces and features including parks, open spaces, playing fields and woodlands as well as street trees, allotments, private gardens, green roofs and walls, sustainable drainage systems and soils. When this report talks about green infrastructure, it also includes 'blue spaces' such as rivers, streams, canals, and other water bodies (Town and Country Planning Association, 2022).

The benefits that green infrastructure bring have been established for a long time and can be divided into four broad categories (The Parks Alliance, 2020):

Boosting business and the local economy

Increased footfall in and around green spaces increases revenue for local businesses, creates and safeguards jobs, and improves property values within close proximity of green infrastructure (The Land Trust, 2018). Investing in the local environment can have significant economic benefits for the performance and competitiveness of a local economy (Groundwork & the Centre for Local Economic Strategies, 2011).

Investment in green infrastructure also has the potential to create jobs in the parts of the country that need them most. Improving woodland, peatland and urban parks could create 16,000 jobs in areas experiencing the most severe employment challenges (Green Alliance, 2021).

Improving individuals' health and wellbeing

Living in a greener environment protects and promotes good health and evidence suggests that disadvantaged groups gain a larger health benefit when living in greener communities (Public Health England, 2020). The presence of green infrastructure can encourage active travel, especially where green infrastructure is linked to good quality walking and cycling routes and public transport options (NICE, 2018). Parks and green spaces are estimated to save the NHS around £111 million per year in reduced GP visits (Fields in Trust, 2018).

Tackling climate change and protecting the environment

Green infrastructure helps to mitigate the impact of extreme weather events, which are becoming more frequent and severe as a result of climate change. For example, the presence of green infrastructure helps to cool urban areas during heatwaves. Cities and large towns are especially vulnerable to extreme heat due to the urban heat island effect and increasing the amount of green infrastructure in an urban area helps to reduce temperatures, protecting both infrastructure and human health (Beddow, 2022). Well-designed green infrastructure also reduces water run-off during flash flooding and provides sustainable drainage (Green et al, 2021).

Green infrastructure can also contribute to carbon capture and storage – trees contribute to carbon sequestration and trees planted in urban areas may have the added benefit of reducing energy use through their natural cooling effect (The Trust for Public Land, 2016).

Supporting social connections and cohesion

Elements of green infrastructure – particularly parks and other natural spaces – form part of the social infrastructure of a neighbourhood. Social infrastructures are places that allow people to gather, supporting community life (Latham & Layton, 2022). The value of parks for social connections has been particularly obvious during the Covid-19 pandemic, when they were sometimes the only places people were able to spend time outside their own homes or to safely meet family and friends as restrictions lifted. Parks and other natural spaces are often free and without set opening hours, making them flexible places for sociability.

Community activities that use green infrastructure can bring further benefits for social cohesion. Community gardens, for example, have been shown to facilitate the growth of individual agency, participation, and the renewal of reflexive and proactive communities (Cumbers et al, 2018).

Inequality in access to nature

The presence of green infrastructure, then, can make a valuable difference to the quality of life for people living in a neighbourhood. However, there are significant inequalities in the provision of green infrastructure in the UK – and consequently in individuals' access to nature.

One in eight households has no access to a garden and in urban areas this figure is higher: **21%** of Londoners do not have a garden. In England, Black people are nearly four times as likely as White people to have no outside space at home (Office for National Statistics, 2020).

This inequality persists in access to public natural spaces, such as parks and nature reserves. Almost three million people do not live within a 10-minute walk of a public green space. People in some regions are more likely to have adequate access to green space than others, with those in the South East and East of England best served, while London has the lowest amount of publicly accessible green space per person and people living in the Midlands and North of England are less likely to have green space within a 10-minute walk. Overall, green space provision is better in Wales and Scotland than in England, though there are still pockets of green space deprivation in these nations (Fields in Trust, 2022).

Alongside these regional inequalities, people from different demographic groups experience inequalities in access to nature. Almost **40%** of people from ethnic minority backgrounds live in green space deprived areas, compared to 14% of White people (Friends of the Earth, 2020). People living in low-income households and people from ethnic minority backgrounds are less likely to live within a short walk of green spaces than others (The Ramblers, 2020). Parks, neighbourhoods, roadsides, and through-routes in deprived areas were more often described as being blighted by litter and not being looked after, which puts people off visiting (Jorgensen et al, 2019).

A review of the evidence by Groundwork (2021) found that even when green infrastructure is present in a community, some people experience complex barriers to accessing it and enjoying its benefits. People from minoritised groups are particularly likely to experience barriers relating to accessibility, relevance, and safety:

- Accessibility includes physical barriers that might prevent disabled people and others from entering or using a natural space. It can also include barriers outside the space itself, such as lack of safe walking and cycling routes or public transport.

- Relevance is about how well the design and facilities in a natural space align with what people want and need from it. For example, youth provision may be aligned to the interests of one group of young people but exclude others with recent campaigns focusing on the value of parks and green spaces to teenage girls (Make Space for Girls, 2022).

- Safety means feeling secure and welcome in a natural environment. Experiences of harassment or fear of crime can mean that some people do not feel comfortable in parks or other natural settings, meaning that they are less likely to choose to spend their time there.

The review was undertaken in collaboration with representatives of 23 organisations in the environmental and social justice sectors. Based on the findings, the group identified three missions to work towards collectively:

1. To reimagine urban nature to ensure that it meets the needs and desires of communities today.

2. To rebalance power in the management of green and blue spaces and build better partnerships.

3. To integrate urban nature solutions fully into efforts to tackle health inequalities, climate change and biodiversity loss.

Environmental regeneration in the UK

The need to enhance green infrastructure in our communities was recognised in the Levelling Up white paper published in February 2022. The flagship policy document identified green spaces as one of three areas of focus for its policy programme on regeneration, part of a wider mission to enhance 'pride of place' for communities that suffer from a dearth of social infrastructure. The white paper makes clear that (Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities, 2022a):

"Access to safe, attractive communal green spaces is critical to enhancing the attractiveness of towns and cities."

However, it also acknowledges that many areas do not have enough access to good quality green spaces and that improving access and quality is crucial.

Interest in green infrastructure among national policymakers has come and gone in waves over the last four decades.

In the 1970s and 1980s the closure of heavy industries, such as coal mining, left many communities facing the twin problems of economic decline and a legacy of environmental degradation.



Various environmental regeneration initiatives took root in response to social problems and poor environmental quality. In the north west of England these included Groundwork and the Mersey Basin Campaign, both reflecting a growing emphasis on place-based initiatives and partnerships between the public, private and voluntary sectors. These initiatives thrived and expanded throughout the 1990s, benefiting from close ties to the governments of the day (Barton et al, 2021).

By the late 1990s, the need to 'repair the gashes in our urban fabric' and design more sustainable towns and cities led to local environmental quality and 'liveability' being promoted by Lord Rogers as part of the Government's 'urban renaissance' agenda. A parallel Urban Green Spaces Taskforce paved the way for new thinking about design and management with the establishment of the expert advisory body CABE Space. This coincided with the roll-out of major initiatives such as the Millennium Greens programme, which created 245 new areas of public open green space close to people's homes (Natural England, 2022) and Groundwork's Millennium programme Changing Places, which transformed 21 large-scale ex-industrial sites into green spaces with the involvement of local communities (Benjamin, 2001). The National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal subsequently highlighted the importance of 'quality of place' – including the natural environment - in addressing deep-rooted social issues (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2010).



These practical and policy initiatives led to many examples of successful environmental regeneration projects which can be visited today. For example, Collier's Moss in St. Helens was created on the spoil and waste from the Bold Colliery and Power Station. Formerly one of the most industrial sites in the country, efforts by various organisations and the local community over several decades have transformed it into a biodiversity-rich green space and a vital resource for local people (The Mersey Forest, 2022).

Since the early 2010s, austerity policies and declining local authority budgets have once again threatened the existence and quality of green infrastructure in many towns and cities. It is estimated that £690 million parks funding has been lost between 2010 and 2021 and more deprived and heavily urbanised areas have experienced some of the deepest cuts (Association of Public Service Excellence, 2021). Meanwhile many popular green spaces have been commercialised as venues for private events or 'pay-to-use' facilities in order to raise much-needed revenue.

Many in the sector have pointed to the 'boom and bust' nature of investment in green spaces compared to the long-term planning approach taken to other forms of national infrastructure. Although the Government briefly convened a Parks Action Group, there have been no major policy initiatives or dedicated funding programmes developed to stem this decline in recent years. Innovative work on managing and financing urban green spaces has continued through initiatives such as the Future Parks Accelerator, led by the National Trust and National Lottery Heritage Fund, and urban green spaces are beginning to feature in the thinking of wider environmental initiatives such as Financing Nature Recovery UK.



Green infrastructure and regeneration funding

The Levelling Up white paper announced a **£9 million** Levelling Up Parks fund (Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities, 2022a), which was launched in August 2022 (Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities, 2022b). The fund is aimed at helping 85 local authorities create or improve green spaces in their most deprived areas. No further details of an additional **£30 million** investment earmarked for parks in the White Paper have yet been made public (Downes, 2 August 2022).

However, the **£39 million** committed to parks in the white paper is a small fraction of the total available to improve local areas. There are more significant funding pots available to support place-based regeneration into which green infrastructure could be incorporated as an essential element. Almost **£1.9 billion** has already been allocated through competitive funding pots, with billions more due to be distributed over the next few years.

The major sources of government funding available for place-based regeneration include:

- The **UK Shared Prosperity Fund** provides **£2.6 billion** of new funding for local investment by March 2025. This fund is designed to replace EU Structural Funds, which the UK will not have access to after 2023, and the first investment plans are expected to be approved in October 2022.
- The **UK Community Renewal Fund** worth up to **£220 million** in 2021-22 was designed to help local authorities prepare for the UK Shared Prosperity Fund.
- The **Levelling Up Fund** is a **£4.8 billion** investment in local infrastructure between 2021-22 and 2024-25, **£1.7 billion** of which was allocated in the first round.



With the first funding from UK Shared Prosperity Fund due to be allocated this autumn, examining whether the UK Community Renewal Fund and the Levelling Up Fund have been successful in supporting green infrastructure as part of place-based regeneration should provide an indication of whether nature recovery is being successfully mainstreamed in the Levelling Up agenda.

UK Community Renewal Fund

The Community Renewal Fund was billed as the precursor to the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, with local authorities encouraged to bid for funding for projects which could be delivered within a relatively short timescale. The four national investment priorities for the funding are:

- **Investment in skills**
- **Investment for local business**
- **Investment in communities and place**
- **Supporting people into employment**

Projects were also expected to demonstrate a contribution to net zero objectives and wider environmental considerations.

Under the investment in communities and place priority, improving green spaces and enhancing natural assets is highlighted as a potential area of spending. Environmental regeneration projects, then, should be eligible for funding under this programme.



Analysis of the successful funding bids (Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities, 2021a), however, indicates that projects focused on green spaces and environmental regeneration were not well represented.

As table 1 shows, less than **5%** of the total budget of the UK Community Renewal Fund was granted to projects that used the natural environment as a focus for regeneration, either through physical improvements to the natural environment, increasing access to nature, or developing nature-based skills through employability initiatives.



	Number of green infrastructure projects	Number of projects	Value of funding for green infrastructure projects	Total funding	Percentage of funding
England	**10**	**225**	**£4,586,877**	**£125,561,514**	**3.7%**
Scotland	**6**	**56**	**£1,883,105**	**£18,428,681**	**10.2%**
Wales	**13**	**165**	**£2,585,126**	**£46,855,257**	**5.5%**
Northern Ireland	**3**	**31**	**£957,435**	**£12,362,975**	**7.7%**
All UK	**32**	**477**	**£10,012,543**	**£203,208,427**	**4.9%**

Levelling Up Fund

The government has committed up to **£4.8 billion** investment in local infrastructure between 2021-22 and 2024-25 through the Levelling Up Fund.

Investment themes for the first round of funding focused on transport, regeneration and town centre investment, and cultural investment. Parks and green spaces are mentioned under each of the two latter themes (HM Treasury, 2021). Successful bids to the first round were announced on 27 October 2021 (Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities, 2021b), with almost **£1.7 billion** allocated.

Analysis of publicly available information about the funded projects, set out in table 2, shows that just five were mainly focused on green infrastructure projects, totalling less than **£64 million** or **4%** of total funding.

A further **30** of the **105 funded projects** mentioned green infrastructure as part of projects with another focus – however, the emphasis on natural features was often a very marginal part of the project bid, with many making only a brief reference to "planting" as part of public realm capital works.

	Number of projects	Value of funding allocated	Percentage of total funding allocated
Nature focused projects	**5**	**£63,889,317**	**3.8%**
Projects with mention of green infrastructure or access to nature	**30**	**£478,398,357**	**28.3%**
All projects	**105**	**£1,693,323,657**	

Is levelling up funding reaching areas of green space deprivation?

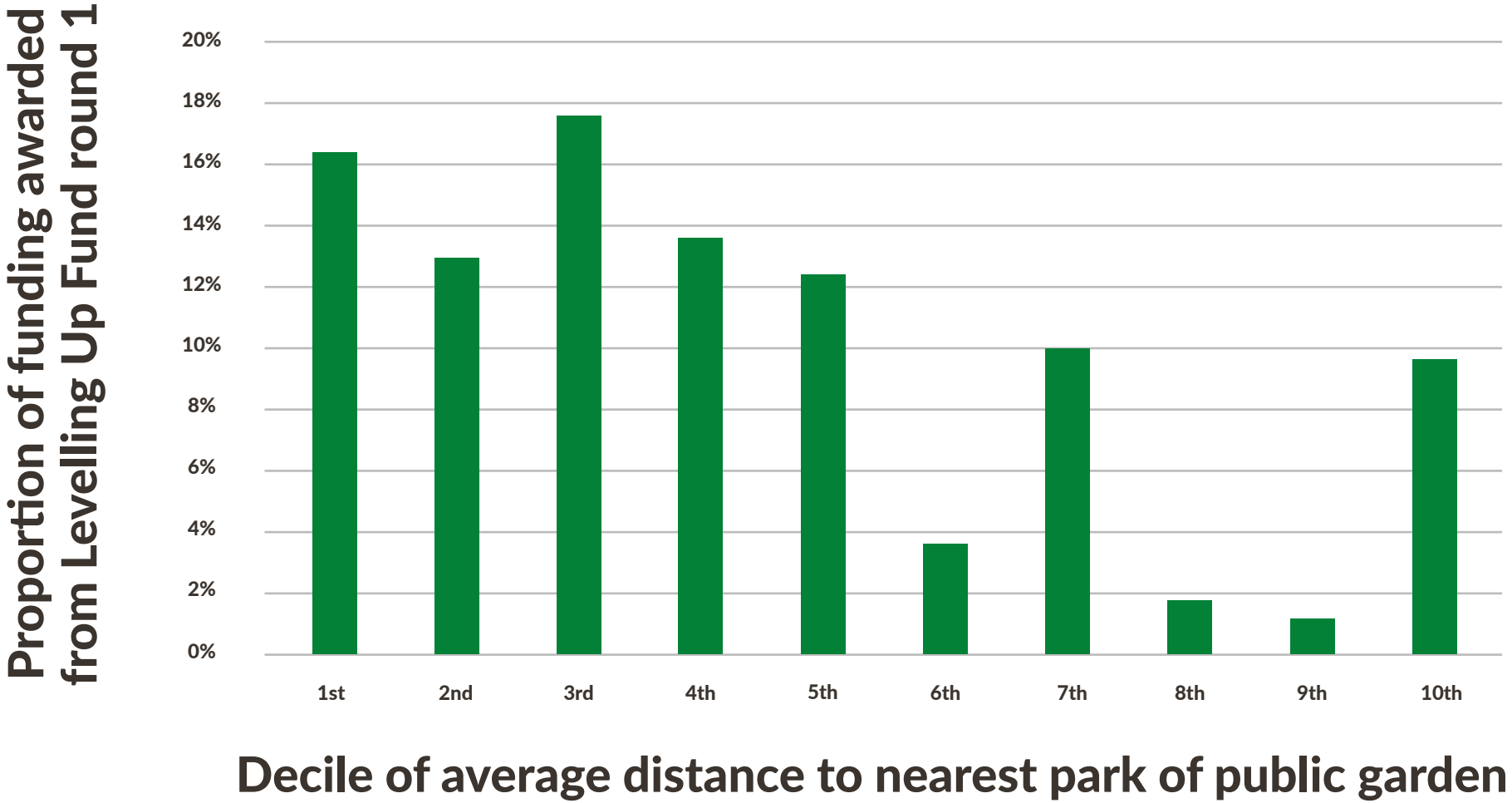
The funding allocated through round one of the Levelling Up Fund gives an indication of where funding for regeneration has been concentrated so far. Analysis of the funding awarded at local authority district level in England, Scotland and Wales[1] (Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities, 2021b) and Office for National Statistics data on access to green space (2021) shows that areas where the average distance to green space is the smallest have received the vast majority of funding.

The chart on the next page shows the distribution of funding by decile of average distance to the nearest park or public greenspace. Local authorities in the 1st decile have the shortest average distance to the nearest park or public garden, while local authorities in the 10th decile have the highest average distance.



1. Local authorities in Northern Ireland are not included in the ONS data on access to public greenspace; grants awarded to larger geographic units are not included in this analysis as they cover multiple local authority districts (Derbyshire, East Sussex, Gloucestershire, Lincolnshire, Liverpool City Region, and Somerset)

Distribution of Levelling Up Fund round 1 according to green space access



74% of funding awarded to local authority districts went to the half of local authorities in which average distance to public parks and public gardens is the shortest. This suggests that some of the parts of the country where residents are least likely to have good access to public parks and green spaces within a short walk of their home are missing out on funding intended to ‘level up’ the country.





Conclusion

Despite longstanding recognition of the importance of green infrastructure and access to nature to pride of place and people's quality of life, it would appear that little emphasis has been placed on these factors in the bids developed and approved for recent regeneration-related funding. Green infrastructure has proven benefits for health, community life, climate, ecosystems, and local economies, but only a small fraction of investment has been allocated to green infrastructure projects – and funding is not reaching the areas where it is needed most. While the outcome of bids to the first round of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund is not yet known, it is likely that this pattern will be repeated.

The UK's new prime minister faces a number of high priority challenges as she takes office and sets out her new team's programme for government. Despite much debate about its future, the levelling up agenda and department appear, for now, to be intact. However the rhetoric evolves over the coming months, there will remain a political imperative to deliver improvements in the environmental, social, and economic infrastructure of places where people feel marginalised and overlooked. Placing a higher priority on green infrastructure in our approach to regeneration not only delivers a visible change, building confidence and aspiration, but also helps lock in benefits in terms of health improvement and climate adaptation for the long term.



Achieving this is dependent on action at a number of levels:

- **Government** needs to create the vision, framework and incentives – re-committing to existing policy on nature recovery and biodiversity net-gain, embedding a legal right to access to nature in the planning system and building nature-based solutions more fully into social value requirements linked to public procurement.

- **Local authorities** need to think creatively about ways to embed green infrastructure into programmes of regeneration and development, bringing nature closer to people's daily lives and involving the community in plans to reimagine the way green spaces are designed and managed to ensure that they are accessible, relevant, and safe for everyone.

- **Combined authorities and elected mayors** should be building the creation and management of green infrastructure into their strategies for transport, housing, business support and skills.

- **Developers and property managers** can do much more to support accessible green infrastructure by adopting nature-based solutions in the design of new or regenerated residential and commercial spaces.

- **Infrastructure businesses and public bodies** with large land assets, such as the NHS and Ministry of Defence, should strengthen their commitments to managing and maintaining their estates in a way that promotes community benefit and nature recovery.



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