Nature-based neighbourhoods policy sprint

Note of key findings and discussion points
24 October 2024

1 Background

Despite the multiple benefits provided to people and nature by green spaces, and ambitious national targets and initiatives to improve nature and the environment, there is a consensus from organisations involved in urban greening that more must be done to maintain, retrofit and increase provision of urban green spaces. Those involved in delivering local urban greening projects are struggling to make them work, even though national policy and legislation aims to deliver significant environmental improvements. This indicates a disconnect between national policy and ambition for nature and biodiversity and initiatives seeking to enhance nature at a local level. This policy sprint invited representatives from public, private and voluntary sector organisations engaged in urban greening to consider the following key question:

How can local nature-based projects be helped to contribute to delivering a healthier, greener, more resilient and more biodiverse country?

2 National policy and strategies for urban green space in England

In order to set the context to address these questions, participants took part in a policy mapping exercise to understand:

1) The current national policy framework for urban green spaces, and whether this coherently supports the delivery of national environmental objectives, and
2) How national policy for urban green space could better enable and support local action to improve urban greening and create nature-based neighbourhoods.

The exercise revealed that policy responsibility relevant to nature-based neighbourhoods is split between multiple government departments, and action to deliver the government's environmental objectives are reflected across multiple plans and strategies. Some of the key policy documents relevant to urban greening and the challenges and opportunities presented by them are set out in the table at Appendix 1.

The following key discussion points arose from the discussion:

- Policy for urban greening is characterised by fragmentation, or ‘dis-integration’. This is occurring at a national and local level. During the policy mapping exercise, many potential policy levers for supporting the delivery of urban greening were identified across health, transport, sport, flood management, natural environment, planning and education. The challenge is that whilst these provide clear justification for urban greening (as a mechanism to deliver against a range of policy priorities), these tend to work in silos and there is no clear line of sight in how national environmental objectives translate to local interventions. There is no clear policy on urban green space in England.
- The policy sprint also revealed a sense of policy disconnect between national and local policy priorities. This is evident in the lack of clarity around roles and responsibilities, and lack of institutional leadership on key issues (such as climate adaptation for urban areas, and parks and green spaces). The financial situation of local authorities makes it hard for them to prioritise urban greening without national direction to do so.
- There are policy tools with potential to deliver better outcomes for urban greening, but these are weakened in practice because they have limited weight and/or are poorly resourced.
- A challenge at the local level is that there is often no ‘single source’ document that sets out the local strategy for urban greening. Many policy tools were identified that had potential to provide this, including green infrastructure strategies, local plans, and LNRS. Each of these has unique challenges:
    - green infrastructure strategies are not a requirement and not all local authorities will resource them,
    - local plans have the benefit of statutory status but also have a long review timetable and their focus is on new development so can be limited in effecting retrofit of existing, and
    - whilst LNRS have the potential to address multi-functional benefits of nature recovery, guidance currently indicates the focus of these will be on improving habitats.

  It is clear there is a need for a platform for integration or strategy for green infrastructure at the local level, there is not consensus about what this should be.
- The policy sprint heard examples of good practice, including how Sow the City advisors were enabling community greening in Manchester, and how Plymouth City Council’s strategic approach to Green Infrastructure was providing a foundation for change. Good practice is happening, but it is the exception rather than the rule. National policy has the potential to enable and drive better practice.

Whilst the sprint was focused on policy, practical barriers to delivery were also acknowledged, including the need to properly resource additional requirements on local authorities that are legislated for (e.g. LNRS). Lack of long-term funding, poor attention to maintenance and stewardship and the need for green skills across key sectors to address the nature emergency were also acknowledged as key challenges.

3 Where are the policy gaps?

These challenges are supported by recent reports on the provision of green spaces. The bullet points below provide a summary of key policy challenges highlighted in these reports.

- Responsibilities for green spaces and parks are split across government departments, meaning there is limited direction and leadership from central government.[1]
- Recommendations to create a cross-departmental group to coordinate action on parks and to create guidance to local authorities on the creation of parks strategies have not come into fruition.
- Policies and targets for green infrastructure provision are ambitious, but there is limited guidance about how their delivery can support local priorities, particularly in urban areas.
- Policy tools developed to support authorities recognise and improve green spaces are 'either not statutory, not comprehensive enough or not sufficiently widespread in usage' to have significant impact.[2]
- Government initiatives are not joined up and there is need for more clarity on how BNG, LNRS, the Land Use Framework, and the GI Framework interconnect. The Environmental Improvement Plan sets out actions for improving nature but 'it is not clear how actions and policies contribute individually and together to deliver significant improvement to the natural environment and to deliver specific targets and commitments.'[3]
- This also appears to be the case at a local level, for example the need for better integration between health and planning.[4]
- There doesn't seem to be clear guidance or expectations about community engagement and consultation on green spaces at a local level.

In addition to the above policy challenges, the delivery of national objectives for green infrastructure and green spaces is hampered by practical barriers, including funding cuts to parks departments, skills and staff shortages. Parks are often presented in terms of their cost 'burden' and not in terms of the cost benefit they provide meaning they compete for investment against other services. This makes it difficult for local authorities to justify investment in their provision and improvement.

4 Opportunities to strengthen policy for urban greening

In the early months of a new government, national policy on many issues in a state of flux and change. There are also inherited policy tools from the previous administration that is currently unclear will be taken forward. Some of these could present opportunities for enhancing national policy on urban greening, such as:

- A Land Use Framework for England
- National Development Management Policies

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[1] *Public Parks.* House of Commons Communities and Local Government Committee, January 2017. Available from: https://committees.parliament.uk/work/1890/public-parks-inquiry/

[2] *Letter to the Secretary of State on the Urban Green Spaces inquiry.* Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, March 2024. Available from: https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/43847/documents/217487/default/

[3] *Progress in improving the natural environment in England 2022-2023.* Office for Environmental Protection, January 2024. Available from: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/progress-in-improving-the-natural-environment-in-england-2022-to-2023

[4] *Improving access to greenspace: a new review for 2020.* Public Health England, 2020. Available from: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5f202e0de90e071a5a924316/Improving_access_to_greenspace_2020_review.pdf

- Levelling Up and Regeneration Act includes a requirement for local authorities to develop design codes (not yet enacted).
- A New Towns code and ‘golden rules’ for ‘grey belt’ development.

Funded initiatives may also provide a meaningful step towards urban greening. The Nature Towns and Cities project will support 100 towns and cities to make tangible improvements to access to nature and green space.

5 Potential levers for change

At the policy sprint the following ideas were shared as potential levers for change:

- A national mission to green our towns and cities. This could provide funding and prioritisation necessary to embed urban greening across relevant policy areas. Led from the top, it could also drive action in local communities. Visible leadership to champion the agenda is needed – as seen in Paris where a Climate Action Plan has been championed by the city Mayor.
- The role of local government and communities was emphasised as central to this agenda. Placing nature-based neighbourhoods as central to corporate priorities would lead to green infrastructure being seen as a crucial delivery tool to meet local priorities, rather than a burden. This may also help integrate green infrastructure across different departmental plans and strategies, including food, health and transport.
- A policy on green skills would support and enable the transformation required to deliver against environmental objectives.
- Tools such as LNRS and the GI Framework need more weight, and to be embedded in planning.
- It was acknowledged that there were participants in the room that represented innovative practice and delivery at the local and community level. There is potential to capture learning from these examples to create a toolkit or handbook: ‘how to create a nature based neighbourhood’. This could cover how local policy levers have been used effectively, and how enabling interventions have supported local communities to improve green spaces.

These reflect the challenge that more policy clarity is needed to guide and enable local action and be meaningful for communities.

6 Next steps

The policy sprint highlighted the need for both a more strategic and clear national policy framework to enable nature based neighbourhoods, and the potential for local communities to be better supported in navigating the existing framework to deliver local outcomes. These ideas are being further considered by WFET and the TCPA, and stakeholders will be further invited to engage as ideas develop in the new year.

7 For more information:

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Appendix 1: Table of policies and strategies with an influence on urban greening in England

Department / organisation responsible	Policy / strategy document	Commitments relevant to urban greening:	Challenges	Opportunities
Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra)	Environmental Improvement Plan Sets out the government's plan for delivering the ten goals of the 25 year Environment Plan.	Increase tree canopy and woodland cover to 16.5% by 2050. Green infrastructure in towns and cities will help reduce peak temperatures. Everyone will live within a 15-minute walk of green or blue space.	Urban trees – action limited to NPPF requirement for new streets to be 'tree lined'.	Targeted forest schemes in most deprived urban areas. Commits to working across government to meet 15-minute goal but does not provide detail. Green Infrastructure Framework a key tool for monitoring progress. Currently being reviewed, could reflect better impacts for local communities. Green paper on Access to Nature?
Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG)	Urban parks and green space policy	Some funding opportunities have been released such as the £9 million Levelling Up Parks Fund, 2022.	There is currently no clear national policy on urban parks and green spaces. There has been very limited new policy on this from MHCLG in many years.	Possible green paper on access to nature? May be led by DEFRA but could have implications for MHCLG?
MHCLG	National Planning Policy Framework	Planning should enable provision of safe and accessible green infrastructure and plan positively for the provision and use of shared spaces. Plans should accommodate green spaces based on an assessment of need. Allows for the designation of Local Green Spaces (affording more protection) where they are 'demonstrably special to the local community and holds a particular local significance'. Plans encouraged to take a strategic approach to the enhancement of green infrastructure.	Makes no specific reference to the role of parks in providing accessible green infrastructure. Makes no differentiation between the approach to GI / parks provision in urban and rural contexts. Threshold for designation of Local Green Spaces is fairly high. GI policy has useful hooks, but not worded as a strong policy requirement, which leaves its coverage and weight and decision making vulnerable.	Recent (summer 2024) NPPF consultation - land released from the Green Belt would meet 'golden rules' including improved access to good quality green spaces within a short walk of their homes. Development on 'grey belt' would also need to 'include delivering access to good quality green spaces and nature.' The provisions are positive but limited as only apply to certain developments in the Green Belt.

Department / organisation responsible	Policy / strategy document	Commitments relevant to urban greening:	Challenges	Opportunities
		Planning policies and decisions should ensure that new streets are tree-lined.	Poor integration with tools such as the GI Framework. No requirement for Local Plans to seek to rectify deficiencies in local green infrastructure.	NPPF should be revised to make complying with the GI Framework a requirement to get planning permission. May be an opportunity in future revisions to improve the national environment chapter which is weak in some areas including SuDS and stewardship.
MHCLG	Planning Practice Guidance. Provides further guidance on the implementation of national planning policy.	Health impact assessments 'a useful tool' in recognising where health impacts might arise from development. LPAs responsible for assessing the need for open space and opportunities for new provision. GI referenced as supporting many policy outcomes (flood resilience, climate adaptation) GI strategies 'can be a useful tool'. National strategies 'can inform the approach to green infrastructure.'	No direction or requirement to carry out a health impact or green space assessment – no guidance on how policies might address any deficiencies in provision.	The role of national and local strategies for GI and nature in planning could be strengthened.
MHCLG	Spatial Development Strategies, Local Plans and Neighbourhood Plans	Scope of new round of strategic plans tbd by government, but potential for nature to be included as strategic policy issue.	Still uncertainty around the geography and scope of proposed strategic plans. Because NPPF is not directive on green space policy in local plans, practice is inconsistent across authorities. Tendency to focus on protection of existing space rather than provision of new? Limited in scope because directs new development with limited ability to	Will be part of the statutory development plan. Opportunity for policies for nature to be considered at regional level. Local plans have statutory basis so provide an important local policy tool to secure green space improvements. Local authorities could improve outcomes by linking local plans to other tools (e.g. LNRS and GI Framework).

Department / organisation responsible	Policy / strategy document	Commitments relevant to urban greening:	Challenges	Opportunities
			support retrofit of urban environments to enhance nature.	
MHCLG	National Design Guide and the National Model Design Code Local design codes	'Nature' and 'public spaces' included in the ten characteristics of well-designed spaces. Makes connections between GI provision (including green open spaces) with multiple benefits (play, design, air quality, quality of life benefits).	Nature is presented as one of the ten characteristics, meaning opportunities to integrate across other priorities may be lost? The Levelling Up and Regeneration Act requirement for local authorities to produce a design code has not yet been enacted. Codes are often developed too late in the process to influence development at early design stages.	Urban areas are referenced with mention of specific GI interventions that may be appropriate for urban contexts. Present an opportunity to set clear expectations for green infrastructure in new development.
Natural England	Green Infrastructure Framework	Aim is to 'provide benchmarks that enable local authorities to compare different areas, highlighting good green infrastructure provision and helping to identify and address inequalities in provision.' Green infrastructure standards are recommended levels of GI for major new developments and area wide application. Urban Nature Recovery Standards include a range of ambitious targets for enhancing nature recovery and urban greening. Urban Greening Factor aims for 40% urban greening in urban residential neighbourhoods.	The GI Framework currently has limited weight in practice, and the standards are therefore best practice / voluntary. There is weak integration with the NPPF and it has not been strongly embedded in development process.	Green Infrastructure Framework fulfils a commitment in the 25 Year Environment Plan to establish a cross-government project that is led by Natural England and reviews as well as updates existing standards for green infrastructure. Planning reform expected in 2025 could ensure that implementing the GI standards becomes a requirement in Local Plans and planning permissions.
DEFRA	Local Nature Recovery Strategies	Main purpose of LNRS 'is to identify locations to create or improve habitat most likely to	There is a disconnect between the language of Natural England's Action Plan, which includes a priority action	There is potential for LNRS to provide a platform that integrates local strategies for nature recovery, climate adaptation,

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48 'responsible authorities' across England		provide the greatest benefit for nature and the wider environment.' Proposals are intended to guide where the public, private and voluntary sectors focus their nature recovery efforts for greater collective impact. Guidance states that the focus of LNRS is directed at habitat and nature recovery objectives, with wider benefits (eg public access) as secondary, other than in section on Green Belt. Government 'intends' LNRS to inform local planning.	to 'prioritise Nature Recovery in urban areas, ensuring people outcomes are embedded within Local Nature Recovery Strategies' and the LNRS guidance which sets out a narrower scope and purpose. Delivery of actions in LNRS are not guaranteed. Status / weight is therefore limited although local plans must 'take account'. Funding / capacity to deliver not guaranteed.	flood resilience, access to green space, direct BNG investment etc. LNRS should 'reflect' on contribution to national environmental objectives and targets and 'align with them where possible'.
UK Government	England Trees Action Plan 2021-2024	Putting more trees in our towns and cities Committed to all new streets lined with trees. Developers should work with local authorities to 'plan, plant and manage' these trees and agree funding 'including through developer contributions such as Biodiversity Net Gain.' Should contribute to local tree and woodland strategies.	Focus of strategy is on woodland creation – the urban tree actions are minimal and linked to minor NPPF and NMDC changes. Nothing about strategies for urban resilience / greening existing streets / linking to increased green space access. Non-government funded tree planting does not contribute to national targets.	A route to reporting tree planting / establishment to contribute to national targets would incentivise communities and corporate funders.
DEFRA	National Adaptation Programme 3	Repeats previous commitments (many of them not yet delivered or published): - Review of climate content in the NPPF - Implementation of Schedule 3 (SuDS) - Land Use Framework - DfT will develop a transport adaptation strategy States that the next Climate Change Risk Assessment will include local spatial	NAP3 feels like a gathering of existing, fragmented commitments rather than a comprehensive strategy for climate adaptation. There are limited hooks to support urban greening.	CCRA4 local spatial assessment to help inform climate change action and provide local-level climate risk data could be a useful resource to support nature based interventions at a local level.

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		assessment to help direct interventions to more vulnerable communities.		
DEFRA	National Flood and Coastal Erosion Risk Management Strategy	Advocates broad range of actions to support resilience to flooding, including nature-based solutions.	Funding for natural flood management schemes and innovation projects is focused and not available everywhere.	GI presents opportunity to link up flood resilience and other objectives, e.g. access to nature.
Department for Energy Security and Net Zero (DESNZ)	Net Zero Strategy	Natural Environment Investment Readiness Fund part of package to ensure a pipeline of investible nature-based solutions projects.	Responsibility split across various government departments.	Role of GI in carbon sequestration a potentially powerful hook to secure investment.
DCMS	Get Active: A strategy for the future of sport and physical activity	Acknowledges role of green space in promoting physical activity, and inequality in access – local facilities plans should include consideration of this.	People will only be active in their local green spaces if they are well managed and maintained, but many councils lack the budgets to do this.	Strategy links to 15-minute green space target.
NHS	Introduction of 42 integrated care systems, coving the whole of England Creating a new 10-Year Health Plan Greener NHS	ICSs are required to support local population health, not just treat people when they become ill. They are run by integrated care partnerships that include both NHS and local councils and communities. Outlines priorities for healthcare over the next decade. Plan for how the NHS operation will respond to climate change, including reaching net zero	Although ICSs are supposed to be delivering prevention, and so should take an interest in local access to green spaces, in practice most of them are focused on hospitals and emergency care.	More focus on prevention within the NHS – opportunity to build on successes (e.g. green social prescribing). Due a refresh in 2025 - opportunity to increase focus on nature and incorporate biodiversity targets.
Local authorities	Green Infrastructure Strategies	Planning practice guidance states that ‘green infrastructure frameworks or strategies prepared at a district level (or wider) can be a useful tool’.	GI strategies are voluntary, and therefore dependent on local prioritisation of resources to produce them.	Play an important role in bringing together evidence on green infrastructure and setting priorities for investment.

Department / organisation responsible	Policy / strategy document	Commitments relevant to urban greening:	Challenges	Opportunities
		(Natural Environment, Para 007)	Many are now quite old as authorities have struggled to keep them up to date.	
Department for Transport National Infrastructure Commission Local and highways authorities	Infrastructure delivery plans (national and local) Walking and Cycling infrastructure strategies Local Transport Plans	Understanding of natural capital improving which provides an important hook.	Currently infrastructure delivery plans tend not to include green infrastructure and are an underused opportunity to secure GI delivery.	Could incorporate GI to enhance its priority. Infrastructure and transport plans could act as helpful levers to support GI delivery if they integrated GI within their scope.