Nature-based neighbourhoods

Background paper for 'policy sprint' to be held on 24 October 2024

1 What is a 'policy sprint' and why is one needed for nature-based neighbourhoods?

1.1 Policy sprints

A policy sprint is a focused and creative event at which informed participants from a range of backgrounds get together to collaborate on tackling a defined policy question. Policy sprints usually result in a short paper summarising what has been discovered that is shared with relevant policy makers to support their work. However, much of the benefit of the sprint is the process of developing a shared understanding of the problem and its potential solutions – and making new connections across and beyond traditional policy silos.

1.2 Why is a policy sprint needed for nature-based neighbourhoods?

The Wates Family Enterprise Trust (WFET), a charitable grant funder with a strong interest in place-making, has identified small-scale urban greening projects, led by communities, as an important way of stimulating multiple benefits, including: empowering communities to improve their neighbourhoods; supporting health and wellbeing; improving climate resilience at a local level; supporting local economies; and contributing to national efforts to meet biodiversity, nature and climate targets.

Despite the multiple benefits provided to people and nature by green spaces, and ambitious national targets and initiatives for things such as tree planting, local nature recovery networks, access to green space, green infrastructure standards, there are many challenges to their provision and access. Residents in deprived neighbourhoods have less access to greenspace than those in affluent areas,[1] and existing green spaces are under threat from poor maintenance, safety issues and demand for land for other uses.

In June 2024, WFET held an event that brought together more than 45 people from local and national organisations involved in urban greening to ask how nature-based neighbourhoods could be supported to proliferate and grow at the pace and scale needed. Through a day of intense discussion and sharing of ideas and experiences, it became clear that there was strong consensus across local government, NGOs and communities that more must be done to maintain, retrofit and increase provision of urban green spaces. One clear avenue to achieve this is in the huge appetite, energy and commitment for community led urban greening projects, but local initiatives often operate in isolation and collectively are unlikely to add up to

[1] *Inequalities in access to green space*. The Health Foundation, July 2024.

more than the sum of their parts. There are some exceptions to this, such as the Right to Grow campaign,[2] from which learning could be captured and shared.

To make the most of this potential, communities must be empowered to make significant contributions to meeting nationally agreed objectives. Policy fragmentation across government departments, and a lack of specific and joined-up policies around community led urban greening, seem likely to be contributing to this situation.

2 What relevant policies are there – and are there gaps?

2.1 Which government departments are responsible for relevant policies?

Policy responsibility relevant to nature-based neighbourhoods is split between multiple government departments. This fragmentation was identified as a significant problem in the CLG Select Committee's 2017 inquiry into Public Parks[3]. The inquiry recommended that a cross-departmental group should be established to co-ordinate policy making: the government agreed and set up a group. However, the group has not survived the multiple ministerial changes that have happened in the subsequent seven years.

Currently, the following departments have policy responsibility for urban green spaces[4]:

Department	Policy area:	Notes:
Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG)	Urban parks and community spaces (e.g. community gardens, allotments).	
MHCLG	National planning policy	CLG is consulting on an updated version, but proposals contain limited changes to policy affecting street trees, green infrastructure etc.
MHCLG	Street trees	
MHCLG	Local authorities (including counties, unitaries, districts)	Some local authorities have green infrastructure strategies, which could help bridge the gap between national targets and local action.
Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra)	Biodiversity and biodiversity net gain	Biodiversity net gain - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)
Defra	National Green Infrastructure Standards and Framework	Green Infrastructure Home (naturalengland.org.uk)
Defra	National nature recovery network, to be delivered by 48 local nature recovery strategies, covering the whole of England, led by county / unitary councils.	Covers the whole of England, although the guidance says little about how LNRs should be delivered in urban areas.
Defra	Commitment in the Environment Act 2021 that everyone will live within a 15-minute walk of green / blue space	

[2] *Right to Grow.* Incredible Edible: https://www.incredibleedible.org.uk/what-we-do/right-to-grow/
[3] See: Public parks (parliament.uk)
[4] To the best of our knowledge.

Defra	Tree planting: legally binding target to increase tree and woodland cover to 16.5% of land area by 2050.	New legally binding environment targets set out - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)
Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS)	Playing fields and sports pitches	
DCMS	Historic parks and gardens	
Department for Education	School grounds	
Department for Transport	Main road and rail verges	
Department for Health and Social Care	NHS Estates and social prescribing	Green spaces included in social prescribing sites, see here.

2.2 What does this mean for places?

With so many overlapping policies, many emanating from different government departments, it is difficult to understand how – in a particular place – these policies apply. The question we would like to try to address with the policy sprint is this:

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

This might lead to the following questions:

- Is there a need for new, community focused urban green space policy? Or does existing policy need clarifying to facilitate place-based implementation?
- Where can local groups get the information and guidance they need?
- How can they identify sources of funding? (e.g. private sector, charitable, etc)

2.3 What are the opportunities?

The new government has launched a rapid review of the national Environmental Improvement Plan to be completed by the end of 2024[5]. It promises to create a statutory plan to protect and restore the natural environment, including tree planting, and to work with civil society.

In addition, the secretaries of state for MHCLG and Defra have written a joint letter to nature conservation organisations[6] setting out their commitment to ensuring that building the new homes that the country needs will not come at the expense of the natural environment. This joined-up approach suggests a new commitment to work collaboratively across departmental policy silos.

3 What next?

The TCPA and WFET will hold the Nature Based Neighbourhoods Policy Sprint on Thursday 24 October. Places will be limited to facilitate successful collaboration, but we aim to invite a broad range of participants from across government departments and civil society.

[5] See: Government launches rapid review to meet Environment Act targets - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)
[6] See: Joint_SoS_letter_to_eNGOs_on_Planning_Bill.pdf (publishing.service.gov.uk)

A short paper summarising findings will be published following the event and circulated to policy makers and others interested in this topic.

4 For more information:

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