

Grey to Green: How We Shift Funding and Skills to Green Our Cities

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"Children in wildflower meadow", Old Rough, Kirby, Merseyside



Green infrastructure, our natural assets such as parks and green spaces, do not receive anything like the investment or management that goes into grey infrastructure, elements such as the road network or sewerage system. CABE's 'Grey to Green' initiative questions whether this is smart investment, given the dangers of climate change and the opportunities to improve public health.

CABE is the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment, the government's advisor on architecture, urban design and public space. Our work includes hands-on advice, training, research and the provision of practical resources and networking. We inspire people with confidence and support them to stand up for better quality buildings and spaces. Our remit is urban England but many of our resources are applicable to rural areas.

Parks and open spaces are the backbone of successful, healthy and vibrant urban areas. Most of our towns and cities are endowed with a haphazard legacy of trees, parks, gardens, allotments, cemeteries, woodlands, green corridors, rivers and waterways. These green assets are often neglected and poorly connected, seen as a liability and burden on the public purse instead of a way to

deliver critical environmental and social and wellbeing services.

From grey to green?

CABE's Grey to Green report, published last year identifies green infrastructure as one of the most practical and cost effective tools we have for dealing with environmental and social problems. In an increasingly straitened financial context, it is vital that resourcing the management and maintenance of our green assets is recognised as a valid and important area of expenditure. Our research and the practical experience on the ground show that severe budget cuts in this area are a false economy.

Green infrastructure is multi-functional. It offers a working landscape and a low impact alternative to addressing some problems we have previously solved with heavy engineering. For instance soft landscape areas absorb heavy rainfall. At the same time these spaces clean and cool the air and provide valuable space for exercise, play and socialising. In contrast, most grey infrastructure has a single function; for example the sole purpose of storm water pipes is to move excess rainfall.

The Grey to Green report suggests that the £1.28bn budget for widening a 63-mile section of the M25 could pay for 3.2m trees to store three million tonnes of carbon; or 5,000 miles of off-road routes for cyclists and pedestrians. Figures produced by PricewaterhouseCoopers for CABE show how a shift in spending from grey to green



of just 0.5% in some local authorities could increase investment in urban green space by 141%.

Most green infrastructure is created at a local level and there is a key role for community groups and councillors to play. Grey to Green suggests that councillors organise regular 'green surgeries' in every ward – along the lines of alternative local Gardeners Question Time.

The community is best placed to know the specific needs and priorities for their neighbourhoods' green spaces and local people can take a central role in driving the improvements they need. This can have a positive impact for both places and individuals.

A proven track record

Green spaces have a proven track record in reducing the impact of deprivation, delivering better health and wellbeing and creating a strong community. For example, living in a greener environment reduces mortality and can help reduce the significant gap in life expectancy between rich and poor. Over the last two years a major programme of research commissioned by CABI has gauged the state of England's urban green space and why it matters for people's health and wellbeing. The results of this programme are published in two research reports *Urban Green Nation: Building the evidence base* and *Community Green: using local spaces to tackle inequality and improve health*.

Overall, our findings strongly suggest that investing in the quality of local parks and green spaces is an important way to tackle inequalities in health and well-being and to improve residents' perceptions of their area. A key opportunity is improving the open space associated with social housing. *Urban Green Nation: Building the evidence base* compiled and analysed existing national level data relating to green space in urban areas in England. The research investigated over 70 major data sources and assembled an inventory of over 16,000 individual green spaces. It is the first study of its kind.

The report shows that people are using their urban parks and open spaces more, and they value these spaces. Almost nine out of 10 people use parks and open spaces. Parks and open spaces are the most frequently used service of all the services tracked. This compares with 32% for concert hall visits and 26% for galleries. Heritage Lottery Fund research reports 1.8 billion visits to parks in England every year. Good quality green and open spaces matter for local authority performance too. *Urban Green Nation* found that if people are satisfied with local parks they tend to be satisfied with their council.

Furthermore, people appreciate their local spaces and this appreciation is increasing. Defra research shows in 2007, 91% of people thought it was very or fairly important to have green spaces near to where they live. By 2009 this had risen to 95%.

Inequalities in provision

However, our research shows that the quality of local green spaces differs dramatically according to people's socio

economic and cultural background. People in deprived areas, wherever they live, receive a far worse provision of parks and green spaces than their neighbours. People from minority ethnic groups tend to have less local green space and it is of a poorer quality.

The most affluent 20% of wards in urban England have five times the amount of parks and general green space (excluding private gardens) than the most deprived 10% of wards. Wards that have almost no black and minority ethnic residents (fewer than 2% of ward population) have six times as many parks as wards where more than 40% of the population are people from black and minority ethnic groups. They have 11 times more public green space if all types (excluding gardens) are looked at.

Community Green: using local spaces to tackle inequality and improve health develops this evidence base further. It examines the impact of the quality of local green spaces on the health and wellbeing of people in six deprived and ethnically diverse areas.

The report found that people view green space as a key service, alongside housing, education and policing. Half of the 500 people interviewed reported they would do more exercise if green spaces were improved, and half expected they would have better mental health. The study also reveals a number of barriers to better use of public green space by black and minority ethnic people. Only half of Bangladeshi people, for example, reported feeling safe using their local green space, compared with three quarters of white people interviewed.

Significantly, less than one per cent of people living in social housing said they use the green space on their estate and the biggest barriers were fear about personal safety, lack of facilities and poor quality. Yet, 17% of households in England are social tenants and social landlords are responsible for the large areas of green spaces that surround these homes. In some areas, particularly London, this green space stock may be greater than the amount owned and managed by the local authority.

Opportunities for change

In response, we recommend there should be more scope for communities to take charge over temporarily vacant land, and that social landlords and local authorities responsible for green spaces should work with voluntary groups to make it easier for people to improve the green spaces on their doorsteps.

A forthcoming guide being published jointly with the Asset Transfer Unit, explores the variety and creativity of the asset transfer approach in relation to public open spaces. It uses examples ranging from a charitable trust that was set up to manage land with a 99-year lease from the local authority, to community groups that initiate temporary uses of land awaiting development.

An important opportunity is improving the open space on social housing estates. CABI and the National Housing Federation, with the partnership of Neighbourhoods Green and over 30 social landlords, have produced a practical

action plan to support improvements. **Decent homes need decent spaces** sets out 10 priorities for change and provides practical examples to help social landlords provide more opportunities for residents to enjoy the space on their doorsteps and meet their neighbours in a safe and pleasant environment.



Making the shift professionally

A key barrier to moving forward, however, is the fact that there is a chronic shortage of people with the right skills to design and manage green infrastructure, which is essential to harness the benefits set out above.

Before the recession, a survey by the Homes and Communities Agency Academy revealed labour shortages of over 90 per cent in landscape architecture and urban design. In a survey of 54 local authorities in 2008, 68 per cent of authorities said a lack of skills in horticulture was affecting overall service delivery. The most common gaps in operational skills were horticulture (51 per cent), conservation (34 per cent), arboriculture (29 per cent) and ecology (27 per cent). The most common deficiencies in managerial skills were identified as design (29 per cent), finance and funding (24 per cent), and marketing (19 per cent).

CABE and partners have published Skills to grow: seven priorities to improve green space skills. This strategy sets out priorities that will create the conditions for an effective green space sector. Our work over the next 6 months includes free one day CPD workshops to share good practice and address skills gaps around three key topics; working effectively with the community; planning for and responding to the challenge of climate change; and fundraising skills.

The recently launched ParksMatch website www.parksmatch.org.uk provides a forum for green space managers to share their experiences and success stories, network and ask questions. Small grants are also available to fund visits to learn from other organisations.

Looking ahead

It has never been more important to argue and prove the worth of green infrastructure. With predicted cuts of up to 40% for local authority green space departments it is critical

we make the best use of existing evidence to increase understanding of the benefits of green space to communities.

Opportunities remain.

Many green spaces remain underused because of their poor quality, yet our research shows providing good-quality local green space is a hugely effective way to tackle inequality. A latent and underutilised resource is the space on social housing estates.

The Grey to Green report argues that we need not only a shift in investment strategies but a change in culture. The functional value green infrastructure contributes to an area is in stark contrast to more orthodox, capital-intensive and technologically based grey infrastructure approaches.

Given the wider benefits that accrue from green infrastructure it would be short sighted to lose sight of the long term picture in favour of immediate cost savings.

References

To find out more about the work of CABE and the publications mentioned above visit www.cabe.org.uk and <http://www.cabe.org.uk/publications> For more information on CABE's training programmes visit <http://www.cabe.org.uk/public-space/skills>

On 20th October 2010, the Government decided as part of the Comprehensive Review to withdraw funding from CABE. This will take effect from April 2011. While CABE has not been abolished, the withdrawal of funding means that the organisations in its present form must be wound up by the end of March 2011. To find out more: <http://www.cabe.org.uk/news/the-future-of-cabe>

Photographic References

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