

31 March 2021

# Towards resilience: Communities and green spaces

This report summarises findings from an event co-hosted with Local Trust and Friends of the Earth. It explores the inequalities in access to green spaces and provision within them, and how communities play an important role in addressing these challenges.

## Synopsis

Green spaces have been pivotal during this first year of the pandemic. They've helped us reconnect with family, friends and neighbours, and provided access to nature in a time when this has been most needed for health. But greater awareness of inequity of access and lack of provision of green spaces close to people's homes, especially for people from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds and lower income families, has also developed.

## Key points

- **Strategies and planning policies rely on data, not personal experiences**  
The guidance that local authorities follow to maintain and create for parks and green spaces rely on data and formal council plans, not the personal experience of how people use and benefit from those spaces. Councils also don't always follow through on commitments around parks and green space.
- **Multiple barriers prevent people accessing and using green space**  
These barriers include: a lack of green space in some communities and proximity to people's homes and workplaces; physical access barriers, such as poor infrastructure in green spaces themselves; and a perception among some people that green spaces and the provisions within them are 'not for them' because of their race, gender or age.
- **Community involvement in the development and protection of green spaces is key**  
The panel discussion highlighted that communities are well-placed to develop plans for green spaces thanks to their local knowledge and relationships. For the greatest impact and successful use of parks and green spaces, communities need to be involved in their creation, development and (especially) protection and improvement to ensure green spaces meet the needs of the people using them.

# Introduction

This event took place on Wednesday 10 March 2021.

Panel speakers were:

- Cath Fletcher, Big Local Firs & Bromford
- Helen Griffiths, chief executive of Fields in Trust
- Naomi Luhde-Thompson, senior lecturer in Delivering Sustainable Futures at Oxford Brooke's School of the Built Environment
- Victoria Marsom, head of England, Friends of the Earth (chair)
- Sultana Shorab, graduate of Friends of the Earth's My World My Home programme

## Discussion: Communities and green spaces

A number of inequalities were apparent when it came to green spaces even before the pandemic. For example, historic inequalities in provision of green space exist across neighbourhoods in the UK – those with more people from Black and minority ethnic and lower-income households tend to have much less access to green space than others.

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Almost 40 per cent of people from Black, Asian or minority ethnic backgrounds live in England's most green space-deprived neighbourhoods, compared to 14 per cent of white people.

Evidence gathered by Friends of the Earth demonstrates this clearly; if you are a person of Black, Asian or minority ethnic origin you are more than twice as likely as a white person to live in areas in England that are most deprived of green space. Almost 40 per cent of people from these backgrounds live in England's most green space-deprived neighbourhoods, compared to 14 per cent of white people.

In addition, inequalities exist in how green spaces meet users' needs, and what sort of activities are provided for. Some parks and green spaces have equipment for sports and play, but others do not. Some spaces are better cared for, more accessible, and feel more secure than others. Green spaces tend to be at risk due to perceptions of safety – some communities would rather build on an area of green space if they thought it was unsafe, to 'improve the neighbourhood' and reduce risk.

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There is real value for the NHS in green space – for every £1 spent on parks, there is £7 in value for health, wellbeing and the environment.

The issue of planning for green space has always been a challenge for councils. Spending on parks and green space is non-statutory, leading them to wait in line behind many other services that councils are obliged to fund – despite there being real value (estimated at £100 million annually by Fields in Trust) in terms of benefit to the NHS in reduced costs. Parks

Alliance research 'Making Parks Count' demonstrates this further – that for every £1 spent on parks there is £7 in value for health, wellbeing and the environment.

We have also long known that boosting the provision of green spaces is also needed to restore nature and mitigate impacts of climate change, as well as having benefits across a range of other public policy.

## Inequalities in green space hit harder during COVID

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected everyone differently, but the experience we all have in common is that the pandemic has drastically changed our routines and lifestyles. With restrictions on our freedom of movement, most notably preventing us from travelling far from our homes, we have been forced to stay close to home for fresh air and exercise.

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Many people in the UK do not have access to a garden, and have to walk further than 10 minutes to even reach green space.

This has highlighted to many the stark inequity of provision of green space in the UK. Not everyone has personal outdoor space at their home, let alone a garden, and many people have to walk further than 10 minutes to even reach green space – and once there it may be much lower quality one than in many other neighbourhoods. When restrictions allow, people with gardens will also be able to meet their family and friends there, but others will be forced to use public green space as an alternative.

There is further impact from this inequity on our health and wellbeing, including our mental health. With reduced access to parks and green space comes reduced opportunity to benefit from the health advantages they bring us, in a time when looking after our mental and physical health has been more difficult than ever due to the stress and anxiety caused by the pandemic.

The fact that council funding now faces further cuts due to the pandemic is likely to make this inequity of green space provision even more stark.

## What we learnt from discussing community-led action on green spaces

Our event on 10 March expanded on a number of the challenges that had been highlighted prior to and during the pandemic. These included:

- how to ensure that local authorities follow through on green space strategies
- how green spaces can fail to meet the needs of local communities
- that decision-makers don't consider the value of social justice and equalities benefits that parks bring to local communities in the same way that they view the benefits of 'green infrastructure' (like temperature cooling and water management) in parks and green spaces
- the impact of physical accessibility in parks and green spaces
- equality of access and offer of equipment in parks and green spaces for women and girls as well as men and boys
- that community engagement and involvement is something of a golden thread that runs through all the panellists' learnings.

## Strategies, planning policies and community involvement in the creation and protection of green spaces

The discussion demonstrated that local councils have great influence over the green spaces within their areas. During the discussion, Naomi Luhde-Thompson shared her views on what communities need to be aware of when tackling planning decisions on green spaces.

Naomi explained that planning authorities often do not make decisions based on people's personal experiences of the environment, but instead rely on data and previously agreed council plans. This led to a brief overview of steps communities can take in dealing with a threat to green space, including:

- checking if a local authority has a green space strategy already
- viewing plans a council might use as a resource, such as their open space strategy, rights of way improvement plan, major development plan and green infrastructure plan when making decisions.

### How (and when) to lobby

In particular, the panel asserted that a green infrastructure plan should be mandatory for councils – and explained that public pressure is key to ensuring that one is enacted. Participants spoke positively about communities and local councillors working together closely to create local ward green plans.

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It can be challenging for communities to ensure that councils follow through on greens-space plans. Lobbying the local authority and councillors using an agreed green space strategy is the place to start when tackling these problems.

Audience members at the panel raised questions around how to get councils to commit to delivering on green space strategies, following experiences where even when these have been adopted in the past, some councils haven't always followed through on what they've included. Both Helen Griffiths and Cath Fletcher suggested that lobbying the local authority and councillors, using the agreed green space strategy, is the place to start when tackling these problems.

However, Naomi Luhde-Thompson made it clear that communities need to ensure that they are engaged with council planning consultations at very early stages – frequently, decisions are made based on council plans created and consulted on several years previously. It can be challenging to make changes to these plans at a later stage.

### Holistic benefits of green space

The panel discussed the frequent emphasis by researchers and experts on 'technical benefits' for communities from green space, such as temperature reductions due to increased tree-planting, or reduced flooding due to water management. But the social justice and health (including mental health) benefits of green space aren't recognised as having as much value – even though they do.

The panel agreed, with a strong view from Cath Fletcher, that green space has holistic benefits, as well as just achieving social justice or environmental outcomes. Helen Griffiths

said there is clear evidence of the health benefits of green space (see further resources section), and that the findings of this need to be used to create policy change.

## Barriers to communities using green space, and how they can work together to overcome them

### Physical barriers

Physical barriers to parks and green spaces and what to do about them was also discussed. Often these are physical entrance barriers to prevent vehicles like motorbikes or quadbikes from entering. However, they can also prevent people using wheelchairs, mobility scooters and pushchairs (especially larger ones) from accessing parks too. Similarly, a lack of good footpaths can make park use challenging for these members of the community.

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Entrance barriers and a lack of footpaths can prevent many people within communities from being able to enjoy or even access parks.

The panel agreed that community involvement was key to challenging these barriers, including in consultations for new green spaces. However, for existing spaces it can be more challenging. The panel suggested that communities can take action on this by gathering access information and issues around existing green spaces and collating it to share with councils.

### Gendered provisions

The topic of equality of access for women and girls in green spaces was also raised. This covered safety in these spaces and access for buggies and wheelchairs, but also a view that infrastructure in parks (such as skateboard ramps, football fields, and so on) might be viewed as primarily for men and boys.

This suggestion divided opinion, and Sultana Shorab said she felt that women and girls also used sports facilities in parks just like men and boys do. Helen Griffiths shared the work of Make Space for Girls, who campaign on this very issue and have campaign materials available for activists to use.

### Spaces people will want to use

From a garden-design perspective, Cath Fletcher shared her experience of creating green spaces that people are enthusiastic about using. She suggested thinking through who was going to use the green space and what it will be used for now and in the future.

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From an aesthetic perspective, it is important that communities are involved in thinking through who is going to use the green space, and what it will be used for now and in the future

There was also emphasis from Naomi Luhde-Thompson on this point that ensuring effective inclusive consultation across the community is crucial to success.

# Recommendations

The discussion highlighted the ways in which communities currently engage with green spaces and how they might hope to do so in the future. But it was clear that more support was needed to ensure green spaces meet the needs of communities, and that their voices are heard in developing them.

To do so, we recommend:

- more planning support and guidance for community campaigners and groups facing challenges with green spaces in their community
- encouraging councils to seek grassroots opinions, experiences and voices to contribute to green-space plans
- creation of campaign tools and resources for community groups to access
- sharing community groups' successes to give confidence and inspiration to other groups
- offering spaces for community groups to come together to find solutions.

Wider recommendations on parks and green spaces include:

## **Protecting existing space in perpetuity**

There should be a legal requirement to protect and enhance the quality of all existing public green space for people and nature.

## **Introductions of a requirement to create new green space where provision is lacking**

New street parks should be created by permanently closing some streets, as recommended by the National Trust and others. These are estimated to cost £3.3 million per kilometre.

## **Strengthen England's land-use planning system, not weaken it**

Planning reform must ensure that existing parks and green spaces are protected, that good quality green space is part of new developments as standard, and that green spaces and parks are treated as part of the wider public realm, not as isolated oases.

## **Investment in green spaces to level up the benefits**

The long-term decline in parks and green space funding should come to an end, with ongoing commitments to finance £4-5 billion a year to 2024, with maintenance of steady levels so that once quality and quantity standards are established, they are maintained without the risks of stop-start investment.

## **Ensure there is both quality and quantity of provision**

The multi-functional role of green spaces and parks should be factored into aims and strategies for health and wellbeing, fitness and physical activity, skills and learning, and climate and nature. This requires new forms of working between national and local government and between departments.

## **Make parks, green space and green infrastructure a properly funded statutory service**

This would bring an end to the situation where local councils have run and managed parks and open spaces, but not as a statutory requirement.

## **Ensure green space is provided for and with people of all backgrounds, with funding for community engagement**

The voices of residents and users must be heard in the management of green spaces to ensure the spaces themselves are inclusive. Community involvement in the practical management of green space, such as planting and nature conservation, should also be encouraged and resourced, including through approaches such as social prescribing.

Communities also hold a wealth of expertise on nature conservation, children's play, outdoor learning and education.

### **Make green spaces hubs for learning and skills**

Green spaces, parks and nature areas should be places where people can acquire new skills, knowledge and confidence, both through informal outdoor learning, and formal skills and education strategies.

## **Further resources**

*Mentioned in the discussion or otherwise giving context to the topic.*

Friends of the Earth's Green space report, Autumn 2020. England's Green Space Gap. Available at: [policy.friendsoftheearth.uk/insight/englands-green-space-gap](https://policy.friendsoftheearth.uk/insight/englands-green-space-gap)

Fields in Trust Green Space index. Available at: [fieldsintrust.org/green-space-index](https://fieldsintrust.org/green-space-index)

National Policy Planning Framework (recommend para 20, para 91, para 150, para 171, para 181). Available at: [gov.uk/government/publications/national-planning-policy-framework-2](https://gov.uk/government/publications/national-planning-policy-framework-2)

The Parks Alliance

Beth Collier writing for the Runnymede Trust. Available at: [runnymedetrust.org/blog/the-race-factor-in-access-to-green-space](https://runnymedetrust.org/blog/the-race-factor-in-access-to-green-space)

Information on Black2Nature, BirdGirl. Available at: [yearofgreenaction.org/green-actions/black2nature](https://yearofgreenaction.org/green-actions/black2nature)

Canals & Rivers Trust on accessibility. Available at: [canalrivertrust.org.uk/specialist-teams/planning-and-design/planning-and-wellbeing](https://canalrivertrust.org.uk/specialist-teams/planning-and-design/planning-and-wellbeing)

Make Space for Girls. Available at: [makespaceforgirls.co.uk](https://makespaceforgirls.co.uk)

'How to build a good park' comic. (Website no longer available.)

Parks Community UK who work with and help Friends of Parks and greenspace groups in the UK. They share ideas and success stories, aiming to empower communities to enjoy, maintain and protect their green spaces. Available at: [parkscommunity.org.uk](https://parkscommunity.org.uk)

Countryside Mobility: 'Enabling access to South West beauty spots'. Available at: [countrysidemobility.org](https://countrysidemobility.org)

Penparceau Food Growing Project. Available at: [penparcau.cymru/penparcau-planting-project/](https://penparcau.cymru/penparcau-planting-project/)

Case studies from the Future Parks pilots in 9 UK cities. Available at: [futureparks.org.uk/places](https://futureparks.org.uk/places)

## About Local Trust

Local Trust is a place-based funder supporting communities to transform and improve their lives and the places in which they live. We believe there is a need to put more power, resources and decision-making into the hands of communities.

We do this by trusting local people. Our aims are to demonstrate the value of long term, unconditional, resident-led funding, and to draw on the learning from our work delivering the Big Local programme to promote a wider transformation in the way policy makers, funders and others engage with communities and place.

## About Friends of the Earth

Friends of the Earth are part of an international community dedicated to protecting the natural world and the wellbeing of everyone in it. We lead campaigns, provide resources and information, and drive real solutions to the environmental problems facing us all.

# Local Trust

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