



Post Pandemic: Green Urban Spaces

A brief guide to increasing the opportunities to green urban spaces and understand and value the benefits this will bring to communities



About this guide

This brief guide looks at the growing movement to increase the amount of greenspace within our urban areas as people become increasingly more aware of the value of, and the need for, increased opportunities to connect with greenspaces and nature much of which has been the result of the impacts and constraints imposed by the Coronavirus pandemic.

Our urban areas have long been typified as barren wastelands — ‘concrete jungles’ inhospitable to plant and animal life. However, the exact opposite may often be true: urban areas can be hosts to significant biological diversity and despite roads and pavements, can still deliver a wide range of environmental benefits.

Nearly any urban area can create interventions that enhance benefits to health and well-being and greater connectivity to the natural world, and with global urban land expansion over the next 40 years predicted to encompass an area the size of Mongolia, remnant natural patches, restored ecosystems and managed green spaces will all become increasingly critical for human health and well-being as well as refuges for biodiversity and increasingly, spaces which will help mitigate and reduce the impacts of climate change..

Through careful and considerate planning, design and management, local authorities and their partners will need to focus on improving and restoring their existing and future green spaces with the aim of improving the life experiences of all the species which will need to co-exist in these spaces.

Therefore, the information contained within this guide will not only be of interest to those elected members and officers responsible for greenspaces and public health and well-being, but also those who are involved in delivering climate change targets, social inclusion, public realm planning and economic development.

The guide considers the following main findings and explores ways in which local authorities can maximise the recognised benefits of urban green space to residents, communities, local businesses and the wider local environment.

- Urban greenspaces are recognised as providing a multitude of benefits to humans, fauna and flora and wider environmental ecosystems. However, these greenspaces are under increasing pressure from a number of different threats, including the growing demands for new land for housing, reducing council maintenance budgets and also from the increasing impacts of climate change.
- Where greenspaces are present, they are not always evenly distributed, nor easily accessible. Often it is in those areas where greenspace is lacking, that its presence would have the most beneficial effects in terms of health improvement, reducing loneliness, promoting community cohesion and providing greater contact with nature.
- To provide members with examples of how greenspaces can be integrated more effectively in urban areas whilst at the same time providing the evidence which will make the case for such proposals during a time when council and their partner budgets are under growing pressure.
- Recognising that the provision, protection and maintenance of greenspaces lies not solely with local authorities, but with a series of partners, all of whom will receive considerable pay back for their support of greenspaces.

This guide also provides some of the latest reports and papers which APSE member councils may find useful in their future deliberations as well as hyperlinks to supporting documents.

1. Introduction

It is now widely recognised that increasing green spaces in urban areas can offer not only innovative approaches to improving the quality of the public realm environment, but in doing so, improve the health and the well-being of urban residents and provide a multitude of associated benefits.

Green spaces can take a wide variety of different forms, which can include different areas of vegetated land, be these urban or rural.

In more detail, these greenspace can include both public and private spaces, such as parks, gardens, playing fields, children's play areas, woods and other natural areas, grassed areas, cemeteries and allotments, green corridors, disused railway lines, rivers and canals and derelict, vacant and contaminated land which has the potential to be transformed.

As well as improving public health, greenspaces also have wider environmental benefits such as increasing opportunities for wildlife, reducing the impacts of air and noise pollution, absorbing excessive rainfall thereby reducing flooding events, and playing a major role in combatting the impacts of climate change by absorbing carbon emissions, and reducing temperatures by providing shade.

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), every city is recommended to provide a minimum of 9 square metres of urban green space for each person, and that it should be accessible, safe and functional.

So important is this need for urban greenspace, that WHO brought together an international team of urban health and green space experts to discuss the practical side of urban green space interventions and produced a report in 2017 which looked at the findings of many academic studies and then summarised these into a simple report which gives a clear route map as to how urban greenspaces can be improved. The report, can be found at the following link: ['Urban Greenspaces, a brief for action'](#).

The importance of greenspace has also been recognised within the UK Government's '25-year plan to improve the environment' which acknowledges the essential role that the natural environment and greenspaces play in people's physical and mental health, and the report states its aims are to improve population health and wellbeing by forging a closer connection between people and the natural environment.

Within this plan there are commitments to improve access to greenspace, by creating better green infrastructure, and encouraging people to engage more through structured programmes that link them to greenspaces, and therefore Government has made a commitment to develop a practical framework of green infrastructure standards that will help deliver more good quality green infrastructure consistently across England to achieve improved health and other outcomes.





2. Greenspaces and health improvement

The evidence bases for the links between health and our understanding of: who benefits, how they benefit and to what extent they benefit, has improved. There is also a greater recognition in national policy of the importance of greenspace in meeting multiple objectives, which include, connecting people to the environment for their mental health and wellbeing, reducing loneliness, creating healthier high streets, and addressing air quality – all of which contribute to the aim of preventing poor health and reducing health inequalities.

Public Health England (PHE), has also highlighted how important greenspaces are to its work particularly with regards to avoidance of diseases associated with inactivity, combatting mental health issues and also the restorative benefits contact with greenspaces can have. To this effect, in 2020 PHE released a report entitled, [‘Improving access to greenspace – A new review for 2020’](#).

This report highlights how greenspace, such as parks, woodland, fields and allotments as well as introduced natural elements such as green walls, roofs and incidental vegetation, are increasingly being recognised as an important asset for supporting health and wellbeing. Using these natural assets, can help local authorities address local issues that they face, including improving the wider aspects of health and wellbeing, managing health and social care costs, reducing health inequalities and improving social cohesion.

The report is further intended to provide Local Authorities, particularly public health teams, with the wherewithal to make the case for maintaining, or even increasing provision of greenspaces and equally ensuring equitable access to greenspace by growing the wider network of green infrastructure, especially through the planning system.

In supporting the delivery of local health, social, environmental and economic priorities, good quality greenspace has the potential to deliver substantial benefits for public health and for wider local priorities at a relatively low cost. Despite these facts, it can still be challenging to make a compelling case, and often greenspace is still seen as a liability rather than an asset. It is clear from the growing body of evidence that that this archaic view needs to be changed.

Furthermore, by adopting a policy of joint – working between the local authority functions of public health, spatial planning, transport, and parks and leisure, this will help to improve the use of good quality greenspace for all social groups and thereby achieve better health outcomes and reduce health inequalities.

Therefore, by understanding, managing and using these natural assets in a more creative way, they can help local authorities address many of the local issues they face



3. The issue of access to greenspaces

One of the main issues regarding greenspaces, is that not all areas have the same amount of greenspaces and therefore access for certain sectors of the public can be limited.

A [recent report by Vivid Economics](#) found that 295 deprived urban neighbourhoods across Britain had what it described as “grey deserts”, with no trees or accessible green space.

These findings are important, as it has been found that the impact of greenspaces upon disadvantaged areas has particular benefits in that they can help improve community cohesion and reduce loneliness. Disadvantaged groups appear to gain a larger health benefit and have reduced socio-economic-related inequalities in health when living in greener communities. Therefore, greenspace and a greener urban environment, can be seen as an important tool in the drive to build a fairer society.

4. Improving access to greenspaces

Within the Vivid Economics report there are a number of suggestions as to how urban greenspace can be improved and increased thereby making it more accessible, and below is a brief summary of these proposals.

Upgrading key existing parks and greenspaces — Improving key basic facilities could deliver a more usable greenspace for all members of the local community.

Greening urban neighbourhoods — Where green infrastructure is lacking the creation of new parks and green streets could provide better connectivity between parts of the existing green infrastructure which would broaden accessibility and use for all.

Creating large scale regional parks and forests in the urban fringe — Connected to the city, these spaces would offer millions of people access to explore and play in the wild, natural spaces, without the need of a car.

The report costed the work required and, although seemingly costly at around £5.5 billion capital investment, along with £275 million annual maintenance costs, the long term returns on investment and public and environmental benefits were substantial. For example it was estimated 20 million people would benefit as a result of upgraded green spaces, 15 million people benefiting as a result of new neighbourhood green spaces and greener streets and finally an additional 7 million people would enjoy a national park experience. Over 6,000 permanent jobs would also be created.

Collectively this would bring an estimated £11 billion in health benefits and £210 million in amenity value. Based on net present value, over the next 30 years this would amount to £204 billion in benefits with a cost ratio of for every £1 spent there would be £20 of benefits.

Further studies have identified even more financial benefits greenspaces provide, such as:

- £2.1 billion per year could be saved in health costs if everyone in England had good access to greenspace, due to increased physical activity in those spaces.
- In a review of the benefits of London's greenspace, it was found that each year, greenspace save some £580 million by contributing to better physical health, and £370 million by contributing to better mental health – health benefits comprised approximately 20% of the total economic value of London's greenspace.
- The annual net benefit to Birmingham residents from their parks and greenspace is nearly £600 million, which includes £192 million in health benefits.
- In Sheffield, for every £1 spent on maintaining parks, there is a benefit of £34 in health costs saved, with local residents being the primary beneficiaries.
- A study of walking on the Wales Coastal Path found that there was a protective benefit of £18.3 million per year, due to the prevention of premature death.
- Estimates of individual benefits include £135 to £452 per person per year derived from having a view of greenspace from home, and £171 to £575 per person per year derived from access to a garden.
- In England and Wales, houses and flats within 100 metres of public greenspace are an average of £2,500 more expensive than they would be if they were more than 500 metres away – an average premium of 1.1% in 2016, suggesting that the public places a value on being near to greenspaces.



5. Coronavirus and greenspaces

The Coronavirus pandemic has led to the closure of shops and other leisure and hospitality venues with the result that greenspaces across all sectors of society have been the only outlet for public exercise and socially distanced interaction. But again the lack of access to these spaces, particularly where they are scarce, has been a problem for many, particularly by the restrictions on travel distance imposed during lockdown. However, where people have been able to access local green spaces, many have recognised the importance of access to nature during lockdown, finding time in green spaces beneficial for their physical health and mental wellbeing.

This recognition of the importance of greenspaces means that it is vital to ensure that public green spaces are easily accessible for all population groups and distributed equitably within the city.

Unfortunately, because of the need for government and local authorities now having to make up the additional costs of Coronavirus, together with the ongoing budget cuts being suffered by parks across

the UK, then the proposals contained within the Vivid Economics report may be difficult to achieve. However, what the report does show, is that greenspace investment clearly has significant returns over the initial investment made and it is hoped that in the longer term, both government and local authorities, and other stakeholders who benefit from the value of greenspaces, will be more willing at looking at increasing funding to these vital and valuable assets.

6. Natural Capital and Ecosystem Services

We often see the value of parks and greenspaces from a merely human value perspective, but the natural resources parks and greenspaces contain have so much more to offer in relation to the wider environmental benefits they provide.

Unfortunately, collectively we are using up these natural resources as though there is a limitless supply.

If we were to take money from our bank accounts in the same manner we currently use up natural resources, we would soon become bankrupt. For as with personal finances, the natural world and its assets have a finite amount beyond which we cannot go, if we do, then we run a serious risk of droughts, starvation and environmental collapse. Climate change is perhaps the most obvious example of this unthinking approach, where the excessive and constant use of carbon based fuels and the emissions created, has led to global warming.

However, there is a growing recognition of the importance and value of these finite natural resources which include geology, soil, air, water and all living things. These resources are more recently being described as, 'Natural Capital'. And furthermore, it is from this natural capital, that it has been recognised that humans derive a wide range of services, often called 'ecosystem services', which make human life possible.

The most obvious ecosystem services include the food we eat, the water we drink and the plant materials we use for fuel, building materials and medicines. However, there are also many less visible ecosystem services, which include: climate regulation, natural flood defences, the prevention of soil erosion provided by forests, the billions of tonnes of carbon stored by peatlands, the pollination of crops by insects, and water purification provided by our rocks, soil and wetlands. In addition to the environmental aspects, it also now accepted that there are also cultural ecosystem services such as the inspiration we take from wildlife and the natural environment and our sense of place within the natural world.

Despite this knowledge, the value or importance of these ecosystems to human welfare is still underestimated and not fully recognized in every day planning and decision-making. In the case of parks, people have tended to pay attention to the aesthetic, social, and recreational contributions of urban parks whilst ignoring their ecological benefits which are many. As part of our urban ecosystems, parks provide several ecosystem services, such as water and [air purification](#), wind and noise reduction, [carbon sequestration](#), [microclimate](#) regulation, wildlife habitat, and social and psychological well-being.



We therefore need to begin to look at our greenspaces from a much wider perspective and recognise that in providing parks and greenspaces, we are supporting and adding to our stock of natural capital and associated ecosystem services.

Consequently, the role urban parks and greenspaces must be seen not only as being areas of recreation for people, but also as areas of remediation for the wider environment.

We need to therefore consider carefully how we plan and manage these spaces, and where possible design and redesign them in ways that protect and promote these ecosystem services, such as through reintroducing and restoring native natural areas as part of our grounds maintenance and wider greenspace management services.

7. Opportunities to enhance and increase greenspaces

Many local authorities are therefore now looking at new ways to increase and improve their greenspaces, through the use of legislative requirements, fostering partnerships, working with local communities and also through the use of development agreements. Recently the requirements of biodiversity net gain agreements [requires future developments to leave biodiversity in a better state than before](#). This means that when applying biodiversity net gain principles, developers are encouraged to bring forward schemes that provide an overall increase in natural habitat and ecological features to urban greenspaces. The forthcoming Environment Bill includes a requirement for all future schemes including the development of land to deliver a mandatory 10% biodiversity net gain. This net gain will be required to be maintained for a period of at least 30 years.

This use of legislation is one approach, but closer partnership working is also bringing greenspace benefits. Currently there are a number of schemes being developed by local authorities across the country which are delivering improved and additional greenspace.

One such scheme is that being devised by Nottingham City Council which is considering proposals to transform an empty 1970s shopping centre into wetlands, pocket woodlands and a wildflower meadow as part of a [post-pandemic urban rewilding project](#).

Driven by the Nottinghamshire Wildlife Trust this new model of inner – city regeneration, is being dubbed ‘urban rewilding’.

This proposal has come about as a result of the number of empty shops on UK high streets rising to their highest levels in six years, and retail giants such as Debenhams and Arcadia Group faltering. In the case of Nottingham, the real estate investment trust Intu which was looking to redevelop the centre, went into administration, and consequently presented city planners and environmental organisations with an opportunity to consider new approaches to developing the city’s future by making it more people and nature friendly.

Another such scheme is where the town of Shrewsbury is planning a similar green transformation project which has been made possible by Shropshire Council’s purchase of the Shrewsbury shopping centre in



2018. The masterplan for the town centre includes high-quality public realm along a riverside walk, and creating green links that provide enhanced access to The Quarry Park. It also suggests the creation of new parks, squares and a Riverside bridge. It is felt by including greater levels of greenspace then it has the potential to act as a catalyst for the development and growth of the whole town centre.

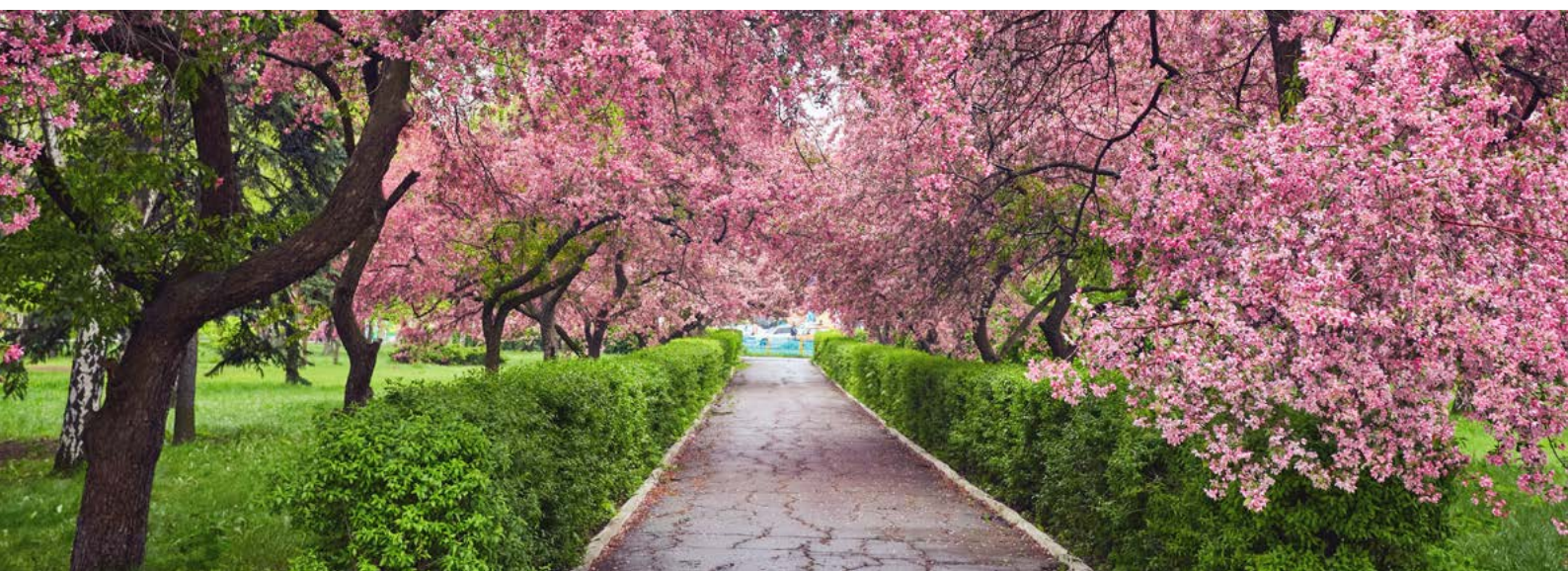
This use of greenspace to breathe new life into towns and cities can also be used at a more local level, as is shown by the recent announcement that one of the UK's busiest shopping streets, Oxford Street in London, is intending to create more space for people, adding trees and greenery, introducing seating and cycle parking, and creating pocket parks throughout the Oxford Street District. Although temporary measures, they have created a welcoming and safe environment to welcome back visitors as lockdown restrictions are eased, helping businesses in the area to bounce back following the pandemic. The initial project will transform the look and feel of Oxford Street and improve air quality – creating a cleaner, greener modern high street with 25 new mature trees (an increase of 40%) and more than 1,500 new plants from 65 different species. The first phase of work, which will be in place for a period of 18 months, will also see bus bays consolidated to make space for pocket parks complete with play areas and lighting installations. Although a temporary measure it shows the power of greenspaces to attract people and the benefits they can derive from exposure to it, even if only for a short period.

8. 'Small is beautiful'

Not all attempts to increase greenspace in the public realm need be multi-million pound projects; roofs and walls covered in plants, street trees and small pocket parks in between buildings can make urban areas more pleasant and healthier places to live, work and invest in. These green features help to act as part of the infrastructure network to foster public well-being, improve air quality, reduce the impacts of flooding, increase opportunities for biodiversity and mitigate against the wider impacts of climate change.

The most recent example of how very small greenspace projects in urban areas can engage with people who may not usually venture into greenspaces is being undertaken by The National Trust which is planting dozens of blossoming trees, including cherry, hazel and plum, at different sites around the UK. These trees will be planted in towns and cities across the country and when in blossom will aim to emulate Japan's 'hanami' which translated means enjoying the transient beauty of flowers. The National Trust hopes that these circles, will be 'a place to remember all those who have lost their lives, honour key workers and reflect on peoples shared experience during the current pandemic.

This approach will not only add to greenspaces but also act as a catalyst for people to realise the beauty of nature and the value it can bring to their everyday lives. The project will see the National Trust and its partners, including Historic England, work with local communities on the design, tree-planting and drawing up of plans as to how the spaces will be used. The Trust said that in the next five years it hoped to plant dozens of blossom-tree circles and avenues in "some of the greyest urban areas" of England, Wales and Northern Ireland.



The first three circles of cherry, plum, hawthorn and crab apple trees are being planted to create the London Blossom Garden at the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park in east London. Since the announcement a number of local authorities working with local communities will also be developing similar schemes including Nottingham, Newcastle and Plymouth.

Therefore although it is recognised that large continuous stretches of greenspaces are critical for maintaining most of the ecosystem services mentioned previously, it is equally important that interspersing greenspaces – no matter how small, with homes, businesses and roadways has value, particularly for maintaining the sense of personal well-being associated with exposure to nature.

9. Threats to our greenspaces

It seems impossible to read any article or listen to any television or radio programme without the value of greenspaces being mentioned, particularly over the last twelve months when people have flocked in their millions across the UK and countries around the world to reconnect with nature.

Unfortunately, studies show that population growth and consequent urbanisation combined with competing demands for land and budgetary constraints, are putting much of our existing local, accessible greenspace under threat.

One such example is the cry from housing developers that some areas of green belt are of poor quality and that they could be given over to development, justifying this claim with the suggestion that more effort could be put into those areas which are of a higher greenspace quality. However, this argument misses the point that green belts were never meant to be of high quality throughout their entire area, but a policy instrument for local authorities to create a land use zone designation which retained areas of largely undeveloped, wild, or agricultural land surrounding or neighbouring urban areas to prevent urban sprawl by keeping land permanently open. And again, we are seeing how we are judging 'poor quality from a purely human aesthetic perspective and not the actual habitat value of such spaces to biodiversity.

As if to echo this concern, a recent report by the Council for the Protection of Rural England (CPRE), has shown that there are currently 257,944 homes proposed to be built on land which has been removed from the Green Belt – over four times as many (475% increase) as in 2013. With only one in ten considered affordable, these new homes will do little to tackle the affordable housing crisis whilst at the same time removing large areas of greenspace and associated wildlife habitats.

However, there is a glimmer of hope as a further poll again commissioned by CPRE shows that there has been a groundswell of appreciation for local green spaces which has continued to grow since the first lockdown, many of these spaces which have gained so much support are located in our Greenbelts.

The poll found that:

- Over two thirds (67%) of adults think protecting and enhancing green spaces should be a higher priority after lockdown;
- Nearly half (46%) reported visiting green spaces more since the start of lockdown – a dramatic 11 percentage point increase since April 2020;
- 59% reported they are more aware of the importance of these local green spaces for our mental health and wellbeing since lockdown.

It is clear from these examples and findings together with the additional comments contained within this briefing, that there is a need to make the case for maintaining or even increasing greenspace in order to ensure provision of equitable access to such areas and the ecosystem benefits these can bring

To ensure this need is met local authorities need to ensure they build this into their planning systems which can require the protection but also enhancement of greenspaces through future development

agreements as well as ensuring greenspace features in the Local Plan.

10. Sharing the load.

As noted previously, the desire to maintain or increase levels of greenspace is not solely the responsibility of a local authority. Protecting and growing these spaces requires concerted effort and close partnership working with other agencies, such as public health, who together with planning departments, parks and leisure management, transport providers, architects, developers, and increasingly, the businesses and the communities who will be using these spaces, need to work together to share costs and responsibility for greenspace maintenance, development and protection if they are to share the benefits

11. APSE Comment

Throughout this briefing note it has been the intention to show how vital it is to not only protect our existing greenspaces, but to also improve their quality and where possible increase the amount, which is critical nationally and ultimately globally if we are to protect our natural capital resources and the ecosystem services they provide.

It is difficult to highlight every example of successful urban greening in this relatively short briefing note, but it is hoped this document contains enough research data, evidence and practical examples to justify greater value being placed on the importance of our urban parks and greenspaces to ensure appropriate levels of funding guarantees their future sustainability.

Long before the Coronavirus pandemic the importance of greenspace had been recognised for the wide range of benefits it brings, from improving human health, providing cleaner air, increasing opportunities for biodiversity to mitigating the negative impacts of climate change.

More recently the value of greenspaces to helping achieve climate emergency plan targets has been a central focus for many organisations with mass tree planting schemes being introduced both nationally and globally which has caused a scramble to find appropriate greenspaces to plant trees.

The decline in biodiversity and, in particular, the huge loss of pollinators has led to wildflower planting, naturalised grounds maintenance schemes and more recently rewilding programmes within our greenspaces.



It is therefore blatantly clear about the multiple benefits greenspaces bring and these have been neatly summarised in a [report previously produced by Leeds University](#).

However, in the current financial climate, where local authority budgets are being continually cut and

now the unexpected costs associated with the pandemic may add further cuts, then difficult decisions will need to be made if these areas are to meet the growing demands from the general public who have found solace in them, particularly during the pandemic period.

Therefore, to maintain and protect greenspaces it requires a new mind-set from the one which still see greenspace, as a 'nice to have' or more worryingly as a financial burden, to one which sees them as critical infrastructure which has a major part to play in achieving wider corporate goals and meeting local priorities and health needs as well as delivering wider environmental requirements.

There will be a need to look at different ways to support council greenspace funding and management in order to meet the needs of the population.

This shift in management thinking will require strong local leadership and political will which recognises the true value of local greenspace as an essential asset in the delivery of health, social, environmental and economic outcomes. It is therefore critical that all relevant parties work together to ensure greenspaces survive and thrive.

Even when the current pandemic abates, people will still see the value of their greenspaces, both locally and nationally, and it will be incumbent upon all those who can influence and protect these spaces to play their part.

The Government's pledge to improve the environment within a generation, and 'leave it in a better state than we found it', needs to be a clarion call for all local authorities and their partners to take the decisions which will leave a lasting green legacy rather than a series of words and promises, and the government itself needs to take a strong leadership approach to ensure it provides the appropriate levels of funding to make this happen.

APSE will continue to be an advocate for greenspaces, biodiversity, mitigating and reducing the impacts of climate change and environmental improvements in general by citing innovation and best practice wherever it finds it.

It is hoped that this briefing note will be of use in helping members to continue to support the provision of greenspaces and ensure they in a fit and proper state for our future generations whatever species they might be.

12. Further Information for APSE member councils

This report was written and researched by Wayne Priestley, APSE Principal Advisor for Environmental Services. Wayne can be contacted at wpriestley@apse.org.uk.

APSE member councils can access support on environmental issues through its extensive network of advisory groups including:

- Parks and open spaces
- Cemeteries and crematoria
- Refuse and streetscene services

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