Greening Up: from fights to rights: making it the default to re-green our streets and squares.

> *"Greening our cities is urgent; it is our duty, it is our obligation. This splendid report champions greening our cities and it offers solutions to the barriers that stop them from achieving their potential as humane and beautiful places where we can live happy and healthy lives."* Carlos Moreno, urbanist, initiator of '15 min city', Professor at Sorbonne University – IAE Paris
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> *"Little can be more important to the web and weave of our neighbourhoods than re-planting millions of street trees up and down the land. This important report from Create Streets shows why we aren't planting street trees and how to fix it. I hope that every politician from north and south, left and right reads it and acts on it. Britain would be the better for it."* Rory Stewart, broadcaster, walker and former MP

Nearly everyone agrees, in principle, that urban greenery is a good thing. As the government has said, "trees improve quality of lives and are vital to our ambition to reach net zero by 2050." [1] Since 2020, there has been a planning requirement for street trees on every new street. [2] Many Labour councils have made similar policies. [3]

However, the reality is sadly different.

- *Levels of urban greenery are declining.* Between 2001 and 2018 urban greenspace in England declined from 63 per cent of the urban area to 55 per cent. [4]

- *New places are less green than old places.* Recently created neighbourhoods have up to 40 per cent less greenery than late nineteenth and early twentieth century neighbourhoods.

- *Many councils cut down old trees and fail to plant new ones.* The most high-profile cases have been Sheffield and Plymouth but private conversations with councillors and officials reveal deep scepticism about street trees in many cases. As one very senior highways official put it to a Create Streets project team, *"If it was up to me, I would cut down every street tree. I am only joking."* But was he?

- *Access to greenery needs levelling-up.* New analysis conducted for this report, finds that the ten most prosperous places in the UK have 25 per cent tree canopy cover. The ten least prosperous have 15 per cent. [5]

What is the hidden wiring of cost, liability, highways regulations and 'agency' which is de-greening our streets and squares?

This landmark report from Create Streets (possible thanks to kind support from Berkeley Group) sets out to answer that question and also to set just out how profound the economic, health, wellbeing, equity and public expenditure case is for more urban greenery, using the widest ever literature review and new primary research and detailed policy recommendations.

Its key findings include that:

- *Urban trees can help both mitigate carbon emissions and reduce urban heat impacts of global warming.* Urban trees can cool city surfaces by up to 12º based on an analysis of 293 cities.

- *Greener places are provably better for our mental and physical health.* Each increase in what is known as the 'Normalised Difference Vegetation Index' is associated with a four per cent reduction in mortality.

- *Greenery measurably adds value for people and land.* Groundbreaking new analysis using UK Treasury Green Book methodology, finds *a positive impact of £6,495 per person living within 500m of a small new park* based on a combination of less depression (£750), higher cognitive development (£150), reduced mortality (£2,999) and reduced crime and high home prices (£3,375).

The report identifies *six barriers to greenery, sets out 16 key priorities for national and local government to turn this around and 48 detailed policy recommendations*. We believe that all of those should be palatable to national and local governments of all political hues.

Amongst the key policy recommendations are:

- *From fights to rights: create a new Right to Plant in pre-set circumstances* so that individuals and local communities have the right to plant, under certain circumstances: certain types of vegetation, in pre-approved places such as existing public green spaces, in front of houses, offices, shops where pavements are above a pre-set width. This should help it become the default to green up your neighbourhood, no longer needing to wade through a thicket of permissions.

> *Relevant case study*
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> For example, in Bordeaux residents and businesses are entitled and encouraged to green up and indeed are given a permit ("*permis de végétaliser*") where, under certain circumstances they are supported with resources (expertise, plants, compost) to plant in front of their homes or businesses. This is part of their Bordeaux Grandeur Nature strategy, now in its 3rd year (started in 2020), to green anywhere they possibly can. '*La ville se mobilise pour végétaliser partout où cela est possible*'

- *Put greenery on an equal footing in highways guidance.* We propose detailed guidance for Highways engineers including, for example, a *Local Transport Note on Urban Greening* to help highways engineers make it the norm to include greenery along all our streets and roads. We also ask, for example, for a specialist round table of experts to convene to reconsider how to balance the significant value of trees (e.g. as we adapt to climate change) against the relatively modest risks represented by trees (and yet often felled for allegedly causing subsidence)

- *Declare a National Mission to Green Up all our towns and cities.* The Prime Minister should declare an overarching National Urban Greening Mission to prioritise the re-greening of our urban centres with the launch of an *Urban Greening Task Force*. This will set clear and robust measures and targets for urban greenery to stop the unnecessary felling (or 'environmental vandalism' a Sir Keir Starmer put it) of mature trees on the one hand and set realistic and robust targets for access to green spaces and, just as

- *Set a new target for exposure to 'doorstep or 1 min greenery'* for new developments and for existing places. Realistic and robust targets should focus on *access* to green spaces.

In addition to the warm welcome to the report given by Carlos Moreno and Rory Stewart cited above, the report has been warmly received by the housing and urban horticulture sectors.

> "Despite a strategic policy framework that strongly encourages more urban greening, there are a wide range of procedures, protocols and processes that militate against an accelerated programme of greening streets and civic spaces. This valuable report spotlights many of these barriers and highlights ways in which they could be overcome. Legitimate constraints on urban greening shouldn't be conflated with burdensome excuses for lack of action." *Peter Massini, Associate Director, London Wildlife Trust Consultancy; Director, Future Nature Consulting*

> "This fascinating report lays out the transformative power of greenery, for all of us, and shows us how we might make it easier to welcome more of it into our urban lives. I wholeheartedly recommend this as essential reading for those who care about the future of our towns and cities." *Ian McDermott, CEO, Peabody Housing Association*

Commenting on the report, Nicholas Boys Smith (founding director of Create Streets) said:

> "Street trees really are a wonder drug, making for provably better places, cleaner air and happier and healthier citizens. They also mitigate the effects of climate change. What was once a ripple of conjecture is now a storm surge of evidence.

> For the first time this report examines the hidden wiring of incentives, regulations and outdated policy which prevents tree-planting and lifts the lid on why strategic statements of intent are not translating into sufficient "greening up" on the ground. We make detailed and actionable recommendations for how national and local government could slice through this Gordian knot so that trees not tarmac, and living in verdant and tree-lined streets and squares could once again become the natural condition for us all."

Lead author, Eleanor Jane Broad (Associate Director at Create Streets) added:

> "What we wanted to do with this project was get to the bottom of why we at Create Streets - whilst trying to help community groups 'Green Up' - were finding it so hard to get it done. Funding, permissions, attitudes to trees – so much seemed to be against what seemed like a most obvious and inoffensive solution to some of the problems a place can face. We found ourselves going into the detail of these obstacles to urban greenery and have come up with a series of 16 priorities and 48 detailed recommendations for how to try and turn this around and help cities re-connect people with nature, not tarmac "

More information and, from 27 September the report itself are available at: [Greening Up – Create Streets](#)

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[1] [Thousands of trees to be planted in communities in boost to nature, health and wellbeing - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)](#)
[2] Paragraph 131. [National Planning Policy Framework (publishing.service.gov.uk)](#)
[3] For example, see Lambeth Kerbside strategy. [The Lambeth Kerbside Strategy | Lambeth Council](#)
[4] Committee on Climate Change (2019), *UK housing: fit for future?*
[5] Create Streets (2023), *Greening-up*, p. 70.