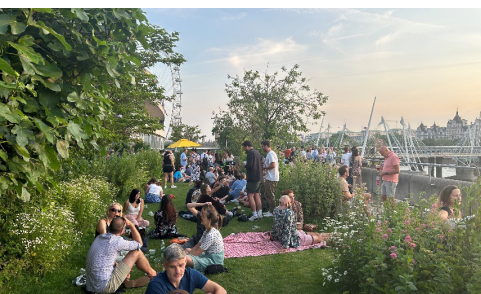




Greening Up

From fights to rights:
making it the default
to re-green our streets
and squares

September 2023



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, initiator of the '15-minute city' concept,
Professor at Sorbonne University – IAE Paris**

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

Executive Summary

The urban wonder drug: why green is good for planet, place and people

We all instinctively know that nature is good for us. A wealth of evidence confirms that our instincts are telling us something true, demonstrating a link between greenery and some variable of health or wellbeing, such as cancer outcomes, schooling, or crime.¹ **Section 1 summarises the best of the evidence from around the world, showing that urban greenery is good for the planet, for places and above all for people.**

Planet

Urban trees can help both mitigate carbon emissions and reduce the urban heat impacts of global warming. Urban trees can cool city surface temperatures by up to 12°C, based on an analysis of 293 European cities.² Trees also mitigate flooding by intercepting as much as 79 per cent of a 20mm downpour over a 24-hour period.³ Urban greenery reduces air pollution by absorbing up to 85 per cent of particulates from the air.⁴

Place

The positive impacts of urban greenery on places and communities are as compelling as the environmental benefits. Street trees are consistently associated with more careful driving and fewer crashes.⁵ Greenery is associated with stronger community interactions, and tends to reduce levels of crime.⁶

The economic consequence of urban greening are equally positive, for both businesses and property owners.

People's perception of whether a shop had a pleasant atmosphere is 35 per cent higher for shops with trees nearby, and people say they were willing to pay 9–12 per cent more in shops located near street trees.⁷ Countless studies have confirmed what every estate agent or home buyer knows; property is worth more in leafy areas.⁸

People

Greener places are better for our mental health. A recent study found an association between the density of London's street-trees and the rates of anti-depressant prescribing.⁹ There is even growing evidence that exposure to greenery may affect cognitive outcomes such as non-verbal reasoning and memory tests in later life.¹⁰ **Greenery is clearly good for our physical health,** as it tends

to induce more physical activity, and is associated with less prevalence including low birth weight,¹¹ maternal diabetes and glucose management in pregnancy,¹² and even irritable bowel diseases.¹³

Value

Cost-benefit analysis showed a positive impact of £6,495 per person living within 500m of a small new park in an urban area, from a combination of less depression (£750), higher cognitive development (£150), reduced mortality (£2,999), reduced crime and a higher house price (£3,375.) The value of more dispersed urban greenery is likely to be even higher as *exposure* and *proximity* to greenery is better correlated to improved health outcomes and property prices than *access* to green spaces.¹⁴ **The best approach to greening up is normally 'little and often' – interweaving modest amount of greenery throughout the urban realm. Street trees really are the closest thing to a wonder drug for urban problems.** People who live in areas with ten more trees in a city block saw their reported health improve as much as would be expected from an increase in annual personal income of \$10,000 and moving to a neighbourhood with \$10,000 higher median income or being 7 years younger.^{15,16}

Some definitions. What is urban greenery and how do you measure it?

Counting 'greenery' in an urban context is not simple. The main methodologies count parks, gardens and open spaces, but not finer grained greenery such as street trees, shrubs, planters, or green walls. This creates distortions, so that leafy Highbury in London is classified as 'deprived of green space', while much greyer, treeless neighbourhoods like the East Marsh in Grimsby are rated higher due to proximity of green space.

In this section we discuss the strengths and limitations of the systems for measuring greenery:

- **Natural England's Accessible Greenspace Standards** is good for assessing how easy it is to access large green spaces, but not the quality of that green space or the greenness of the urban fabric itself.
- **The Urban Greening Factor,** provides a quantifiable measure of the environmental benefits of urban greenery, and distinctions in greenery types, but doesn't say how good a site is for people.
- **Canopy cover** measured using satellite imagery can quantify the total mass of tree cover and allow comparisons across areas. But it does not capture more dispersed types of greenery.

- **The Normalised Difference Vegetation Index** shows how much visible red and near infrared light is reflected from the earth, but does not tell us about the quality of greenery or how visible it is.
- **The Green View Index** measures the proportion of a view in which vegetation is present, reflecting people's street-level exposure to greenery, but its accuracy is not yet guaranteed. All these metrics have strengths and weaknesses, and in practice each is useful in different contexts.

One promising practical approach is **the 3-30-300 rule**: that everyone needs to have sight of 3 trees; every neighbourhood should have 30 per cent canopy cover; and everyone should live within 300m of a park or green space.

Green up to level up

The government's Levelling Up strategy aims to 'end the geographical inequality which is such a striking feature of the UK'¹⁷ with specific objectives around pride in place, levels of crime, local economic productivity, health and well-being – all of which urban greenery can help to improve.

But urban greenery levels already reflect the geography of socio-economic inequality: people on low incomes are less likely to live within a five minute walk of green space or to live on green streets.¹⁸

Planting street trees could help turn the vicious cycles of urban decline into a virtuous circle of place by increasing the 'economics of attraction,' building confidence and social capital, encouraging footfall, de-risking and encouraging investment, supporting the wellbeing of existing residents or attracting new residents.

Urban greenery should therefore be a tool for levelling up, with a specific role to play in seven of the 12 Missions of the Levelling Up White Paper: restoring pride in place; reducing crime, improving security and safety; improving living standards and attracting R&D; closing the health gap by improving life expectancy and levels of well-being; and raising childhood education outcomes.

Case studies

Through our 14 case studies, this report also showcases some of the incredible efforts by communities taking on the challenge of renewing their towns and cities through greening up, often against great odds. From large-scale council-led efforts in Hackney and Enfield, to local organisations like Street Trees for Living, in London, and Arches Local in Kent, there are success stories that show us what can be achieved. Equally, there are as many obstacles standing in the way, with the examples of Sheffield and Plymouth's mass tree-felling a warning that greenery can be removed - quite literally - overnight.

Priorities and policy recommendations

Despite some recent progress and all the evidence of its benefits we are not seeing a surge in greening up across the country. **This chapter sets out how to overcome the six sets of barriers to an urban greening revolution and outlines a comprehensive policy programme for national and local government to green up our villages, towns and cities.**

Mindsets and capacity: how we think about and implement urban greenery

Responsibility for urban greening straddles multiple departments, budgets and agendas and is often marginalised as of secondary importance. Government should make urban re-greening a clear priority for levelling up, health, economic renewal and the green transition. This means aligning budgets, targets and governance to deliver it.

- 1. Declare a National Mission to re-green all our towns and cities:** The Prime Minister should declare a National Urban Greening Mission to prioritise the greening of our towns and cities. This should include media and educational culture change campaigns celebrating the benefits of urban greenery; a national competition to celebrate the best examples; support for commemorative tree schemes and spreading resources and guidance on greening up.

- 2. Launch an Urban Greening Task Force to co-ordinate government budgets and targets:** The Secretary of State for Levelling Up should chair a cross-departmental Urban Greening Task Force to drive delivery and overcome silos across government; set targets for urban greening, including street tree planting, at national, regional and local levels; move urban street tree funds from DEFRA to DLUHC and allocate funds to local authorities using appropriate metrics.
- 3. Set clear metrics and targets:** All parts of government, particularly local authorities, need a clear framework for appraising the value of urban greenery including; standardised metrics to value urban trees consistently (adopting the Capital Asset Value for Amenity Trees and the i-tree methodology); an urban greenery standard that embraces the 3-30-300 principle that everyone needs to have sight of *3 trees*; every neighbourhood should have *30 per cent canopy cover*; everyone should live within *300m of a park or green space*; and assessment of current canopy cover as a baseline for improvement.

Rights not fights: how we cut through the thicket of permissions needed to green up

The maze of specific permissions required to plant street trees is often difficult and

costly to navigate, the liability it imposes on the planter is off putting. Instead of having to *fight to plant* in our streets, we need a more permissive regulatory regime in which we have the *right to plant*.

- 4. Let the people grow:** Create a new Right to Grow and Right to Plant giving individuals and local communities the legal right to plant in existing public green spaces in their neighbourhoods, and much easier to plant in streets.
- 5. Bring highways policy up to date and expect greenery on all our streets:** The current policy framework treats greenery as a problem to avoid and should be modernised to encourage the coexistence of greenery with cars, trams, bikes and trains. DfT should publish a Local Transport Note on Urban Greening of Highways, providing mandatory guidance for all relevant authorities on how to green up streets and roads, including: a hierarchy of greenery for highways making it clear what types of greenery are appropriate for different situations; and clarification that streets need to balance movement and place functions, to stop public places being treated like motorways. Reforming liability and licensing rules should make it easier for *parish councils, residents and businesses* to plant in the streets. Highways Authorities should *prioritise* planting along strategic routes in towns and cities that are most hostile

to pedestrian, and adopt 'grow don't mow' policies to create biodiverse verges instead of clear-cut lawns.

- 6. Green up parking:** Some of the most effective locations for planting are in places dominated by car parking. Green parking should be made the norm by simplifying the Traffic Regulation Order process to allow buildouts for planting to be interspersed between car parking spots and by streamlining permissions and providing capital funding for green roofs on multi-storey car parks. Regulations should be amended to encourage more greenery and less hard standing on front gardens and driveways.
- 7. Challenge unconscious bias against greenery** that has become baked into standards regimes and principles of legal liability, by reviewing the Inclusive Mobility standards to ensure they don't mean trees are unnecessarily removed from streets and amending the National Model Design Code and the Secured By Design Development Guide for Homes. Government should review public liability rules and the Joint Mitigation Protocol between insurers and local authorities to allow a more robust assessment and mitigation of claims for subsidence allegedly caused by trees.

Underground networks: planting in streets stuffed with pipes and wires

Both tree roots *and* utilities should be and can be ubiquitous underneath urban streets, but too often utilities prevent planting in our streets. No one really knows what they will find when they dig, so lots of money is being wasted on surveys and scanning the ground.

8. **Improve the law and guidance on utilities in streets:** Pipes and wires have always taken precedence: the balance needs to be restructured reforming some of the regulations that are overly restrictive of street planting. A National Underground Design Code and best practice guidance for utilities, street design and greening would help clarify what goes where underground, as would putting utilities into shared ducts in all new streets.
9. **Improve information on the location of underground utilities** Speed up the roll-out of the National Underground Asset Register, make utility companies responsible for identifying where it is safe to plant, and make it easier (and cheaper) for communities to use scanners by making them VAT exempt safety gear.

Funding: finding the money to green up

Urban greening has long suffered from a lack of strategic funding, particularly for design, maintenance and long term stewardship. Better information on costs and additional funding is urgently needed, particularly for places that are harder to reach.

10. **Demystify the costs of installing and maintaining urban greenery** by developing standardised costs for community groups and councils planning greening schemes.
11. **Provide more and better funding** by making current urban greening funds less bureaucratic and better aligned to the needs of deprived communities; identify alternative funding pots for urban greenery such as ringfencing parking and Penalty Charge Notices, developer contributions like Section 106 and CIL payments, or the compensation paid for highways disruption. All urban greening funds must cover scheme design and a minimum of three years' maintenance.
12. **Explore new funding mechanisms** to provide protected income for maintenance and stewardship, such as permanent trust structures or charitable status.

Stewarding: taking care of trees for life

Greenery, and particularly trees, are a long-term commitment, requiring ongoing investment and care, especially in the first three years of life, but there are few incentives to provide stewardship.

13. **Incentivise Stewardship** by ensuring maintenance contracts include requirements to water, and use technology to monitor compliance, and exploring the idea of giving landowners a duty of care to their green assets as well as to the people who encounter them.
14. **Organise and unleash the energy of the volunteer** by deploying Council resources and staff to coordinate networks of local volunteers like the Poppy Estate or Abundance London.

Skills: knowledge and experience to green up well

Much tree expertise has been lost from councils, and the roles most closely associate with greenery, are not incentivised to grow green assets. Putting the urban greening revolution into practice will require the right professionals in the right positions.

15. **Make urban green professional a recognised career choice** by appointing Chiefs of Urban Greening at national and local level, to champion urban greening alongside the new Office for Place; recruit, train and develop more Urban Green Professionals; and introduce green qualifications at all levels as a route to green jobs.
16. **Launch urban greening training and skill sharing programmes** including continuous Professional Development training for highways engineers and transport planners, and training and guidance for non-professionals and communities on how to green up their areas.

Recommendations

Mindsets and capacity

1. Declare a National Mission to re-green all our towns and cities

1a Shout about the benefits of urban greening

1b Celebrate greened up streets

1c Remember with trees

1d Help spread best practice

2. Launch an Urban Greening Task Force to co-ordinate government budgets and targets

2a Focus national budgets in the right place.

2b Support the supply of saplings

3. Set clear metrics and targets

3a Standardise metrics to ensure all Local Authorities value urban trees consistently

3b Develop a new improved urban greenery standard

3c Assess canopy cover now, then set targets

Rights not fights

4. Let the people grow

4a Create a new Right to Grow and Right to Plant

5. Bring highways policy up to date and expect greenery on all our streets

5a Publish a Local Transport Note on Urban Greening

5b Introduce a hierarchy of greenery for highways making it clear that not all greenery is equal.

5c Clarify that streets are streets, and roads are roads

5d Make it easier for parish councils to plant in the streets

5e	Make it easier for residents and businesses to plant in the streets
5f	Prioritise planting along strategic routes in towns and cities
5g	Highways Authorities should adopt 'grow don't mow' management policies to create biodiverse verges
5h	Make green bus stops the norm
6. Green up parking	
6a	Make green street parking the norm
6b	Green up multi-storey car parks
6c	Re-greening not paving over front gardens
7. Challenge unconscious bias against greenery	
7a	Don't let equality be the enemy of the green
7b	Avoid making places insecure by bad design
7c	Public liability: don't be scared of trees
7d	Subsidence: tackling that sinking feeling
Underground networks	
8. Improve the law and guidance on utilities in streets	
8a	Clarify what goes where underground
8b	Put greenery on an equal footing
8c	Start putting utilities into shared ducts
9. Improve information on the location of underground utilities	
9a	Speed up the roll-out of the National Underground Asset Register (NUAR).
9b	Make utility companies responsible for identifying where it is safe to plant
9c	Provide communities with better information on how to co-exist with utilities
Funding	
10. Demystify the costs of installing and maintaining greenery	
10a	Develop standardised costs and review commuted sums for maintenance

11. Provide more and better funding

11a	Simplify and improve current urban greening funds
11b	Identify alternative funding pots for urban greenery
11c	'Greenery overspill': channel developer contributions
11d	Green compensation for highways disruption
11e	Fund design, establishment, and maintenance properly

12. Urban greenery in Trust

12a	Explore funding mechanisms to provide protected income for maintenance
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Stewarding

13. Incentivise Stewardship

13a	Don't forget to water
13b	Explore the concept of a new landowner's 'duty of care' towards urban greenery

14. Organise and unleash the energy of the volunteer

14a	Advance existing models of civic urban stewardship
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Skills

15. Make urban green professional a recognised career choice

15a	Appoint Chiefs of Urban Greening at national and local level
15b	The newly created Office for Place should champion the planting of street trees
15c	Recruit, train and develop more Urban Green Professionals
15d	Elevate the role of urban green professional to make it an aspirational career choice

16. Launch urban greening training and skill sharing programmes

16a	Continuous Professional Development training for highways engineers and transport planners
16b	Train non-professionals
16c	'Greenery overspill': let skills from new developments spill into the community

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