



UCL POLICY BRIEFING – OCTOBER 2014 AUTHORS

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KEY FINDINGS

- **Urban green spaces should be seen as an essential part of urban infrastructure** – not an add-on, a ‘nice to have’, or a luxury
- Better tools and ways of **valuing parks** that take account of all of the services that they offer are needed.
- Whilst urban green spaces provide numerous benefits these are often poorly understood and poorly evidenced; **further work is needed to develop the evidence base** to underpin valuation.
- Significant challenges around the provision of urban green spaces include: **understanding their use; budget constraints**; and the lack of appropriate cost-benefit analysis.
- There will be considerable challenges for cities in the future around **population density**, which will place new pressures and demands on green space, and **climate change**, where urban green spaces can play a role in mitigation and adaptation.

Valuing Urban Green Space: Challenges and Opportunities

Introduction

This briefing note summarises the discussion at a workshop held at UCL in April 2014 to discuss the benefits of urban green spaces. The key themes of the discussion related to how and why urban green spaces are valued; how they can be maintained; and how future planning and future cities can incorporate green spaces.

Challenges for valuing and using urban green spaces

Mapping green spaces and understanding and measuring their recreational and cultural usage: Parks are traditionally viewed as a cultural service but it is extremely difficult to measure their usage. There may be more intelligent ways to use technology to do this, but it is still hard to know who uses parks, when and why. There are also challenges around information on all green spaces in the UK, including what they contain and who owns them. There is a need for an ‘urban green space map’ which would make this information readily available. This would help to ensure that individuals, communities and policy makers could make the best use of existing green space.

Maximising, measuring and monetising environmental benefits of urban green spaces: Urban green spaces presently produce enormous environmental benefits which are currently undervalued, and could make far greater contribution to mitigating against future climate change which is currently underdeveloped. These benefits include: improving air quality and temperature by creating cooling effects and reducing carbon emissions; flooding prevention through drainage and stormwater runoff; promoting biodiversity; and many others.

Budget constraints: Budgets for parks and green spaces are already constrained and are likely to come under further pressure. Continued financial pressures are also likely to affect the quality of green spaces. Although parks and green spaces provide broad benefits across a range of spheres, their budgets remain narrowly derived from one source. It may be more appropriate to draw funds from across local authority budgets in a way that better reflects the spread of benefits from investing in parks, especially including current and future environmental and health benefits.

Cost-benefit analysis: There is a lack of robust cost-benefit analysis tools which are sophisticated enough to capture those aspects of benefits of parks and green spaces that are more difficult to value. However, it is important to have robust techniques to support better business cases to continue to make the case for investment in green spaces. Techniques for measuring and monetising the social, wellbeing, health, and environmental benefits of urban green spaces needs to be developed by academics and policy makers.

Protected funding for parks: As demand for land for housing increases and funding remains tight, local authorities may dispose of non-protected parks to raise funds to develop and maintain remaining parks and green spaces. It is important that if this happens, the revenue from such sales is protected to re-invest in other spaces and not diverted elsewhere.

Benefits of green spaces

Parks and green spaces can offer a number of benefits in terms of improving mental health, providing 'green gyms', giving children open space to play in, and offering benefits for wildlife. Additionally, parks and green spaces can play a role in addressing inequality, by playing a redistributive role (they are accessible to all) and provide social capital. They can also offer good returns for health in poorer areas.

Health and Wellbeing

Green spaces offer both direct and indirect benefits to health and wellbeing. For example, immediate benefits of green spaces include reduced anxiety and reduced depression; indirect benefits can arise from an increase in physical activity which in turn impacts on future health. However, whilst some health benefits can be shown, it is difficult to make a direct link from an improved park to increased physical activity.

There is a strong conviction that parks and green spaces offer significant benefits for health and wellbeing (including through their microbial biodiversity) but the evidence of health benefits from green spaces is poor and often contradictory. There is therefore a need for better evidence on the benefits of parks for physical and mental health.

Green space also needs to be taken more into account in considerations of wellbeing. Current OECD and ONS definitions of wellbeing are limited and don't include much on green space – broader consideration of green space would be helpful. It would also be helpful to better understand the impact of the absence of a park. There may be an opportunity to undertake research in parks which are being partially closed for major infrastructure projects such as HS2 and the Tideway Tunnel to better understand this.

LONDON'S PARKS AND TOURISM

The character of London is made up of squares and small green spaces, together with its larger parks. The totality of this public realm contributes to the overall impact of the city. It is likely therefore that London's green spaces are an important part of its appeal to tourists, although it is difficult to attribute specific values to this. Whilst Central London parks (which attract the most tourists) will be well-funded, there may be a need for more active promotion of other parks. Parks may also be important for London's survival as a tourist destination: if London gets unpleasantly hot then tourism will decrease and parks and green spaces can help to mitigate higher temperatures.

Social capital and community cohesion

Urban green spaces provide a number of social and community benefits which are largely unrecognised and undervalued in policy appraisal. Local parks can provide a common space for individuals to meet and encourages the maintenance of existing social networks by providing a low cost and highly desirable social activity, which strengthens "bonding" social capital. They also provide a space for spontaneous intercultural interaction which can increase social integration and expand social cohesion by providing a space where social groups, perhaps otherwise highly geographically segregated, can encounter one another and form "bridging" and "bonding" social capital.

With societal concerns on the rise about immigration, increasing media focus on cross-cultural conflict and a sense of societal disenfranchisement arising from unheralded levels of economic inequality, the common spaces for a community to promote intercultural interaction and social bonding has social and economic benefit like never before, especially in a time when other previously social spaces are increasingly privatised. The benefits of an urban green space to providing a common identity alone should not be underestimated, and provide a unique and multifunctional mechanism for advancing localism.

Localism and urban green spaces

It is important to understand the local context of green spaces and to understand and develop local evidence for different areas. Context is important – people want different things from different spaces and different benefits accrue from these. There are also significant geographical variations in the provision of urban green space and how it is used between different cities.

It is also important to ensure that people discover and value access to local green space. Volunteering may be one way of doing this – in some parks local people do a significant amount of the work which is an effective way of engaging them and better value than independent contractors.

Valuation and valuing of urban green spaces

Parks and green spaces are an essential part of urban infrastructure. They should not be seen as merely 'nice to have'. However, there is an asymmetry in how they are valued: whilst people don't want to lose green spaces, this is not necessarily reflected in terms of willingness to pay for them. They are too often taken for granted and their value is poorly understood.

Parks as assets

Parks are usually valued on asset registers at the nominal value of £1, regardless of their size, condition or contribution to the local community. This is in contrast to trees in parks, which are often valued at thousands of pounds by the Capital Asset Value for Amenity Trees tool. There is a strong case for a valuation approach which values parks as a whole and incorporates all of their aspects, not just trees.

Whilst parks do have inherent value, it is also important to value the services from parks, in terms of biodiversity, environmental benefits, and services to people. It is preferable to look at valuing

the investment in parks because of the benefits that derive from them, rather than simply the park or green space as an economic asset only in itself. There are also important issues around the cultural value of parks, which may not be so easily captured in asset terms. It is important to look at how people value parks and what benefits they perceive from them.

Valuation tools

It is important to understand what can be captured in valuation tools and to understand the purpose and accuracy of cost-benefit analysis. One concern is that some social benefits can be double-counted (for example there are overlaps between health and wellbeing), but this also implies that many costs are also double-counted, generally resulting in unreliable and unrepresentative cost-benefit analysis. There is also a potential pitfall in any financial valuation of a green space as it may mean that developers can simply outbid that particular valuation. Another complication is that because many values are contextual, the underpinning evidence may not be transferable. This may make a valuation toolkit problematic.

There is also a significant question about how any valuation or valuations of parks can be translated into policy implementation. This will also need to include engaging developers so that they understand the value of green spaces. Planning policy should encourage developers to respond creatively to a greater and broader (economic, cultural and social) valuation of green space. Also important will be greater community involvement in the development and maintenance of green spaces as a source of “social investment” which can substantially contribute so economic and natural capital as well as producing greater cultural and social benefit.

Standards for green spaces

Standards for green spaces are needed but there is insufficient evidence to underpin them. There is a need to develop more evidence on minimum standards for green spaces.

Park size and accessibility both matter in the context of development of cities such as London. Market pressure to ‘green’ London (and other global cities) because of gentrification and increased demand for green spaces may increase pressure for standards: for example expensive property will require access to green spaces. It is likely that developers will have to give some consideration to inclusion of urban green space

By 2050 there will be 6.3 billion people living in urban areas – green spaces will therefore be necessary to accommodate physical activity. This is likely to include a mixture of green streets, pocket

parks, larger parks, and other areas. Common standards would be helpful in defining appropriate thresholds around provision, quality, accessibility, and other issues. (For example, the WHO definition of accessibility is that parks should be within 300 metres.)

Challenges for future cities

Increased population density will put more pressure on green spaces. It is likely that fewer people will have private gardens and other private green spaces. Smaller ‘pocket’ parks, which are locally accessible, will continue to be important. In contrast, blue space is less likely to be built on. Other cities have however made use of blue space and London should consider providing access to the Thames.

Climate change will be a considerable future challenge and green spaces will play a role in climate change adaptation and mitigation. There is considerable evidence that parks can help to address air pollution and temperature regulation (they are cooler areas), particularly for larger parks. There is likely to be a need for reconfiguration of existing infrastructures to provide green spaces, breeze pathways, and other amenities to reduce heat. Parks are likely to have crucial functions around health, climate regulation and increased connectivity in the next 30-50 years.

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BACKGROUND

UCL is proposing to undertake research to explore some of the themes raised in this discussion – and in particular the evidence for the contribution of urban green spaces to improved wellbeing, including benefits such as increased social capital, promotion of physical and mental health, and providing a sense of place. The research will also explore the possibility of developing ‘toolkits’ for valuing green spaces which could contribute to business cases or policy appraisals and help local authorities to justify investments in urban green spaces by making the benefits more transparent.