



association for public service excellence

Protecting local greenspace

A 'green and pleasant land'?



Briefing 25/03

February 2025

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Protecting local greenspace: A ‘green and pleasant land’?

The lead author of this was report is Wayne Priestley, APSE Associate, supported by Matt Ellis, APSE Principal Advisor. For any enquires in relation to the survey, Matt may be contacted on:

Tel: 0161 772 1810

Email: mellis@apse.org.uk

About APSE

The Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE) is a not-for-profit local government body working with over 300 councils throughout the UK.

Promoting excellence in public services, APSE is the foremost specialist in local authority frontline services and operates one of the UK’s largest research programmes in local government policy and frontline service delivery matters.

1 Introduction

The phrase 'greenspace, means different things to different people and to the wider community. To some it means the magnificent landscapes found in our national parks such as in the Lake District, Snowdonia and the Cairngorms, whilst to others it means their local parks and neighbourhood spaces near to their homes where children meet and play and where generational memories have been formed.

For the sake of this report, we will be defining greenspace as including parks, playing fields, children's play areas, woods and other natural areas, low maintenance community grassed areas, cemeteries and allotments. green corridors, such as paths, verges, disused railway lines, rivers and canals. We will also consider the greenbelt which surrounds some urban areas as part of this definition. We will not be including gardens around homes as largely these are areas which are not usually the responsibility of local authorities, but we will reference them when considering the wider aspect of this report – the loss of greenspace.

Even before the impact of COVID, the benefits of greenspace were well understood. Academic research has long highlighted the benefits greenspaces bring, including health and well-being, improved air quality, carbon sequestration, flood alleviation, urban cooling, opportunities for leisure and recreation and social cohesion. Therefore, with such a wide range of positives, why are we concerned about greenspace protection?

2 Access to greenspace

It is estimated that around 85% of the UK's population now lives in towns and cities and, although slowing in pace, this is still rising. These urban areas make up roughly 8.7% of the total land area and of this 8.7%, c.6% is built on, the rest being made up of greenspace such as parks and playing fields.

One would assume with 92% of land remaining undeveloped, the ability to access greenspace would not be an issue. However, much of this 92% is already designated, mainly for agriculture, forestry and infrastructure (road, railways etc.) and therefore not easily accessible. This fact is borne out that currently it is estimated that only 8% of England's open spaces have a 'right to roam' designation, in fact, much of the land open to public access is often at the behest of a private landowner.

Furthermore, research has shown that over 2,500 areas in the English countryside which do have a right to roam designation, can only be accessed by trespassing over private land. Even in the areas where there is a right to roam which include mountains, moorlands, heaths and downlands, access can be difficult due to a lack of pathways.¹

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2024/feb/19/right-to-roam-trespass-england-countryside-rules#:~:text=The%20revelation%20that%202%2C500%20areas,helicopter%20for%20their%20legal%20access.>

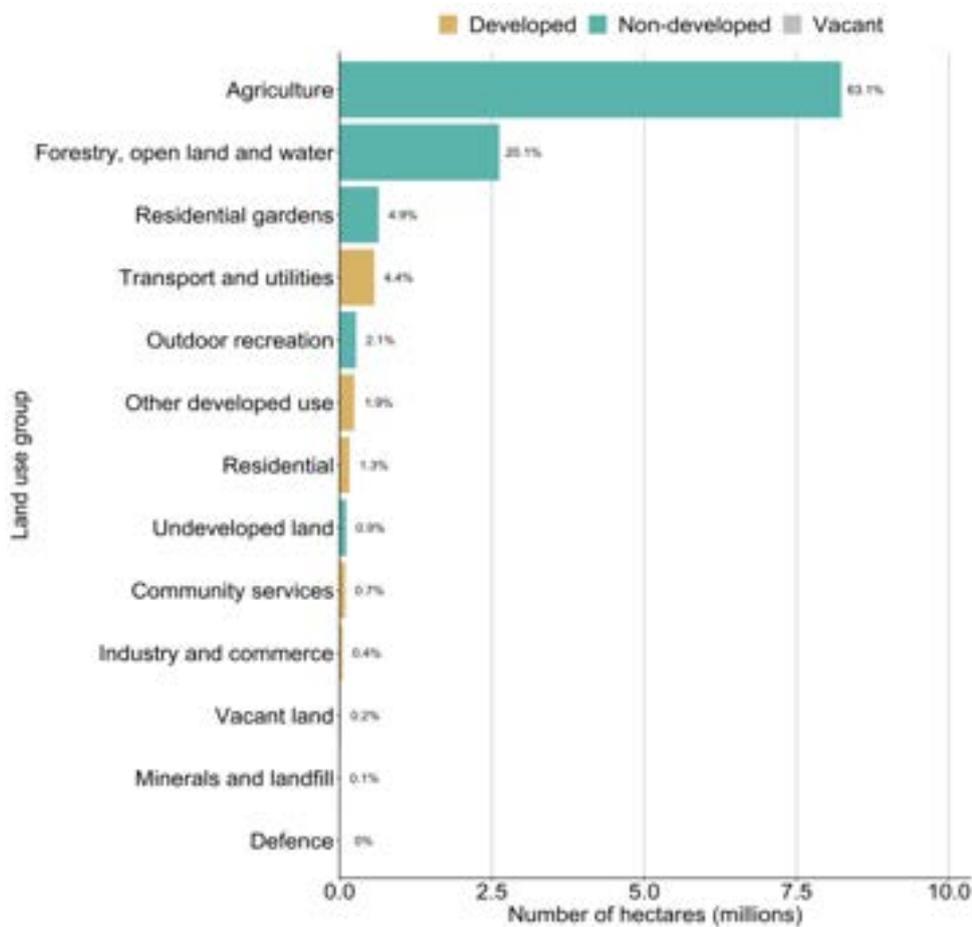
The Ramblers Association, champions of the right to roam ethos, have also stated that there are further difficulties accessing land outside our towns and cities as many of the rights of way that lead to open spaces, are so poorly maintained that they are inaccessible and poorly signed.

However there have been some successes where organisations such as Forestry England and Natural Resources Wales have worked with people to make their publicly owned woodlands more accessible.

3 Gardens as greenspace

When using specific land use groupings as defined in the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Land Use Statistics 2022, almost 5% of England’s land use is classified as residential gardens (Table 1). It has been further shown that over 87% of residents have access to a garden.²

Table 1: Land use by land use group, England 2022



² [https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/land-use-in-england-2020/land-use-statistics-england-2020-statistical-release#:~:text=As%20at%20April%202020%3A,Residential%20gardens'%20\(4.9%25\).](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/land-use-in-england-2020/land-use-statistics-england-2020-statistical-release#:~:text=As%20at%20April%202020%3A,Residential%20gardens'%20(4.9%25).)

In addition, across the UK but particularly in the southeast of England, as house prices rise, people are extending their properties at the expense of their gardens rather than moving home.

Even where homes do have gardens, regional disparities in size can be found, with the largest gardens in the south-east and the smallest gardens in the Northwest, Northeast and London.

When considering these regional disparities, it appears that these inequalities are historical, caused by planning changes. Neighbourhoods dominated by the most recent generation of housebuilding (2009 – 2021) have up to 40% less green space provision than those neighbourhoods built in the late 19th and early 20th-century. In addition, in those neighbourhoods built after 2000, local parks are more likely to be fewer in number and smaller in size.³

These facts are important as, since COVID, many more people are now working from home and as such the ability to have a garden to relax in, away from their home office, has proved critical. Yet, the future for garden ownership looks bleak, thereby increasing the need for parks and greenspaces closer to home.

4 Where do we go for our greenspace?

There are more than 27,000 parks and public greenspaces across the UK, with thousands much smaller spaces which have community value. It is estimated parks alone receive over 37 million visits each year.⁴

As stated previously, there are many benefits associated with these spaces encompassed in the health and well-being of people, nature-based ecosystem services, and wider economic values.

In addition to formal greenspaces, the UK has a series of greenbelts which surround 14 of our largest urban areas; the first greenbelt being introduced around London through the introduction of the (London and Home Counties Act 1938). This empowered local authorities to buy land and keep it open as Green Belt. The aim of the Green Belt around London was to prevent the urban sprawl of the ever-growing city.

The benefits of greenbelts were further strengthened, when in 1947, all local authorities were made responsible for designating land as 'Green Belt' through powers established in the Town and Country Planning Act 1947.

In 1955 the Government asked all local authorities to establish greenbelts in their Development Plans wherever appropriate.

³ <https://neweconomics.org/2022/05/exposed-the-collapse-of-green-space-provision-in-england-and-wales>

⁴ https://www.heritagefund.org.uk/sites/default/files/media/attachments/state_of_uk_public_parks_2016_final_for_web%281%29.pdf

The latest National Planning Policy Framework is now responsible for promoting the requirements of greenbelts which aim to:

- (a) Check the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas;
- (b) Prevent neighbouring towns merging into one another;
- (c) Assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment;
- (d) Preserve the setting and special character of historic towns; and
- (e) Assist in urban regeneration, by encouraging the recycling of derelict and other urban land.

Green Belts have been one of the most enduring pieces of post war planning and have undoubtedly helped to keep a clear distinction between urban and rural by bridging the gap between the natural environment and the built environment in urban areas, which has not been the case in many other countries around the world.

Green Belts also play a crucial part in providing access to greenspace as, collectively, Green Belts contains more than 30,000km of rights of way and provide important access to nature for more than 30 million people.

Contained within some of these greenbelt areas as well as wider areas across the UK are woodlands, which as a land use category, make up around 13.2% of the UK land area and are important areas of greenspace for people across the UK and are now also being recognised as major elements in the absorbing carbon emissions and the wider impacts of climate change in general.

5 The COVID Effect

The recent COVID pandemic saw thousands of people flock to parks and wider greenspaces to escape the confines of 'lockdowns'. For many these spaces provided critical refuges from the ravages of the virus.

COVID changed many things, including changing work patterns, (homeworking), and a greater awareness of the value of green spaces and connectivity with the natural world. In 2020 a report by Vivid Economics and Barton Willmore showed that many people were using and appreciating greenspaces more than before the pandemic and now felt that greenspaces should be higher on the government's priority list.⁵

⁵ <https://nt.global.ssl.fastly.net/binaries/content/assets/website/national/pdf/urbangreen-infrastructure-investment-appraisal-2020-report.pdf>

These widely recognised health and wellbeing benefits, mean that many people now value greenspaces much more than before. However, with the likelihood that many new housing developments are significantly reducing garden size, in some cases providing no garden space at all, then the need to protect our greenspace, whether formal or informal, is paramount.

Yet some reports are appearing to point to evidence that some local authorities are selling off greenspaces. Is this in fact true, and if it is, what are the reasons behind such sales?

In its Annual State of the Market for Parks and Greenspaces Survey 2024,⁶ APSE noticed that several respondents had answered that they had recently sold off areas of greenspace. With previous concerns in mind, it was felt prudent to discover how much greenspace had been sold, what were the reasons for the sale, how was the income from the sale used, and whether the selling of local authority greenspace was a progressive trend.

6 Findings of the APSE Survey

It must be stated at this point in the report, that due to the sensitive nature of the selling of greenspaces the discussions held, and survey undertaken, promised anonymity to all those local authorities who responded.

Therefore, following several discussions with councils who do appear to have sold greenspaces together with responses to the APSE survey regarding the sale of greenspaces by local authorities, it does appear that the amount, of greenspace sold, both in terms of numbers and size of sites, does seem to be relatively small and isolated. Often only small pockets of land have been sold to allow new housing to expand from nearby existing developments or for new facilities to be built associated with the greenspaces themselves such as storage sheds and visitor facilities such as accessible disability toilets. In some cases, the land which has been sold is replaced like for like as part of the sale agreement, or alternatively the income is used to invest in existing greenspaces. Biodiversity Net Gain considerations were also sometimes included as part of the sale.

Where any land was sold to facilitate an income stream, this was the result of the land being defined as surplus through a local needs assessment or in the local authority's green space strategy and was openly advertised for sale. The type of land most often sold, tended to be low maintenance greenspaces and again relatively small in size.

There were a few examples of playing fields being sold, but this was agreed with users, in the instance highlighted in the survey, local football teams agreed the sale as this allowed them to use the money from the sale to access funding from football funding initiatives.

Within the survey responses, was a comment that some greenspaces had been lost to active travel and greenway developments which had impacted on habitat provision and led to a fragmentation

⁶ <https://apse.org.uk/index.cfm/apse/members-area/briefings/2024/24-14-state-of-the-market-on-parks-and-greenspaces/>

of interlinked greenspaces. This is likely to be the loss of roadside verges and small pockets of low maintenance greenspaces, but it does reflect the need to consider the impact such losses can have on biodiversity and habitat provision. Indeed, there were very few positive responses to the question of whether ecological impact assessments had been carried out before land was sold, perhaps a reflection of the small scale of the sites sold.

Interestingly, one of the comments received was that although parks and greenspaces were still a high priority, and no wholesale sales were 'on the cards', there was a feeling that parks needed to work harder to protect their future existence. As such the responding local authority was looking to more effectively 'sweat the assets' of their greenspaces by considering proposals to introduce solar panels, underground heat generation and using existing parks features such as ponds and lakes to mitigate the impacts of climate change through providing opportunities for flood alleviation.

A report recently created as part of the Powering Parks project, by climate charity Possible, identifies that by installing heat pumps under parks and public green spaces, this could provide warmth for up to 5 million homes. If this potential was harnessed, 30 gigawatts equivalent to 10% of the country's total peak heat demand could be generated as well as UK carbon emissions being cut by 8 million tonnes each year more than 2% of UK emissions.

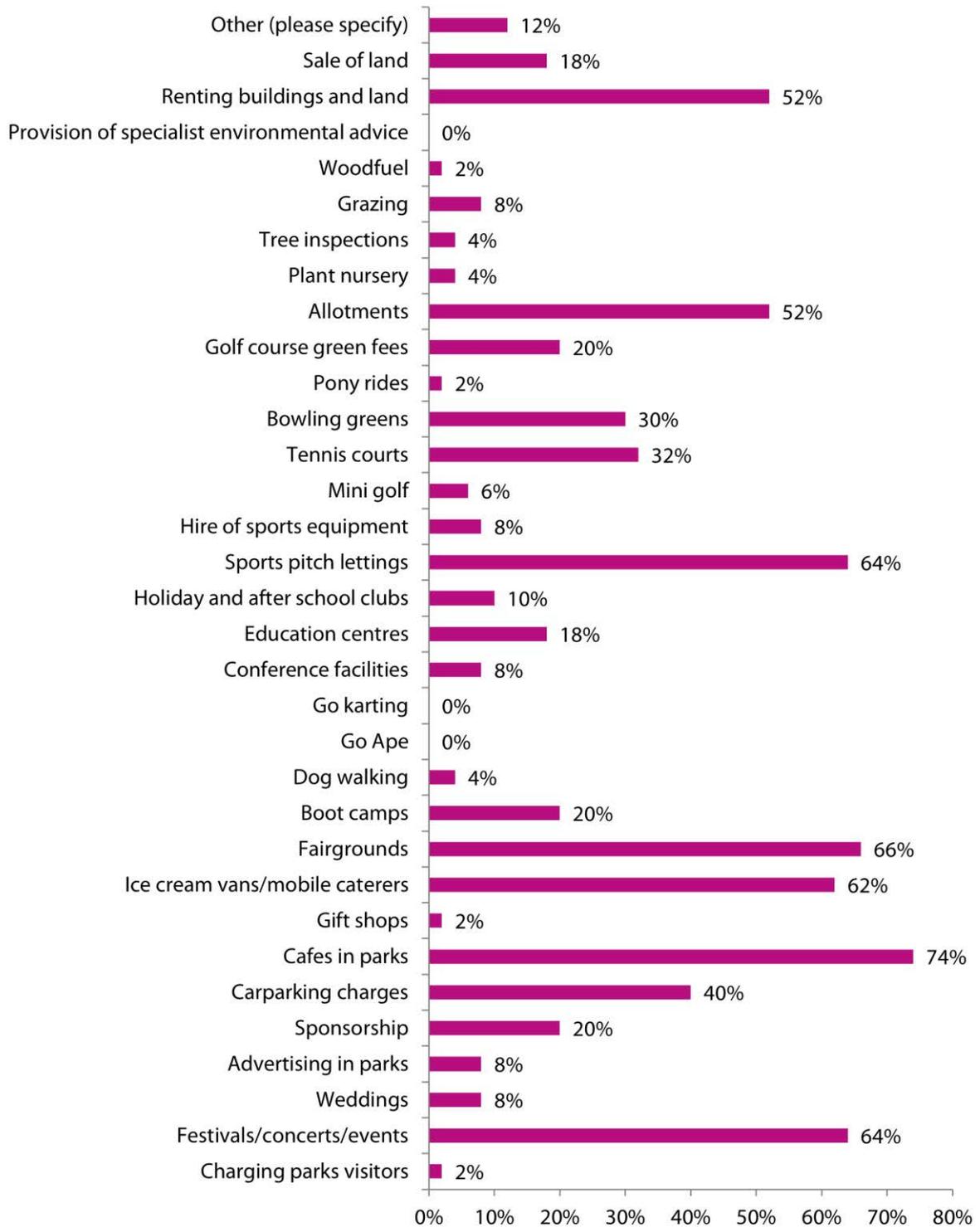
Several councils, including, Hackney, Glasgow and Edinburgh are now considering opportunities to generate such sources of heat.⁷

Income generation in greenspace, particularly in large urban parks is an area where there has been a great deal of innovation across the UK. APSE's State of Parks and Greenspaces report 2024 identifies the different ways local authorities are trying to plug budget gaps by charging for activities, events, franchises or land use within these spaces (*see table overleaf*).

Within the same report almost 75% of respondents replied that they were expecting further budget cuts within the next five years making the generation of income even more of a priority.

⁷ https://thisbigcity.net/generating-energy-from-city-parks-and-green-spaces/#google_vignette

4.1 What areas do you currently generate income in through fees and charges (either provided in-house or through a franchise)? [Multiple choice]

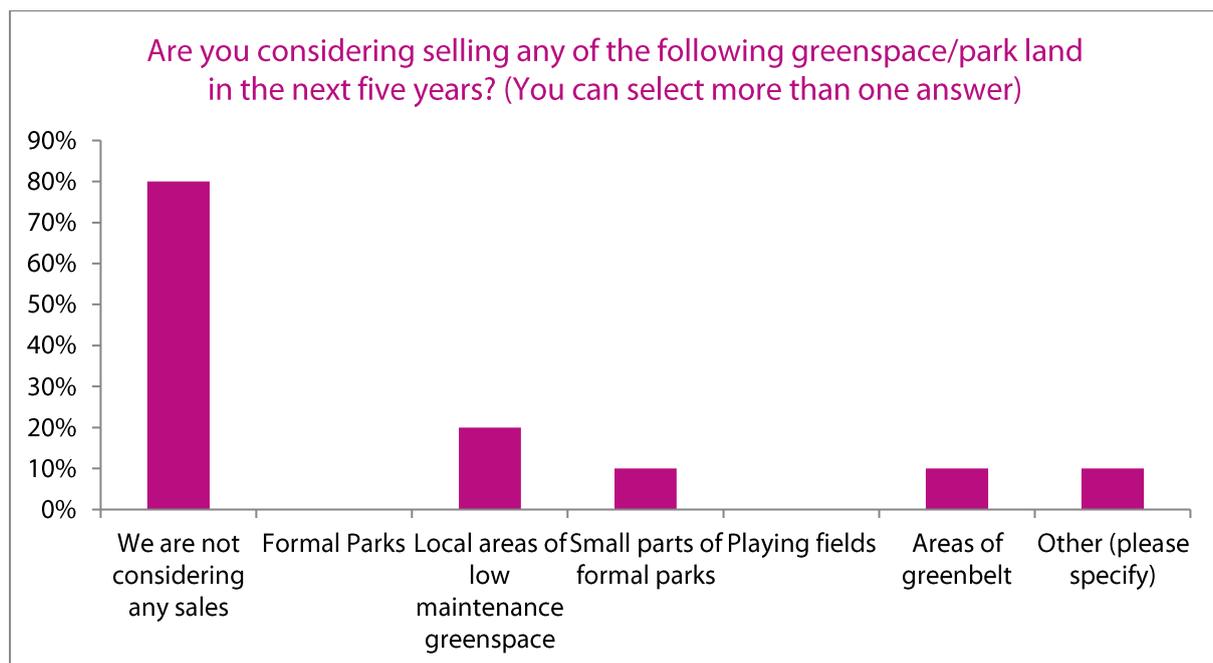


However, income generation can be a double-edged sword. Parks and green spaces have since their inception been largely free to access and the APSE State of Parks and Greenspaces 2024 also notes that 91% of respondents agree that Parks and the wider greenspaces should remain free to access. But with the problem of reducing budgets and the need to increase income generation opportunities means that some parks can become less attractive to low-income families, or cause areas of parks to be closed off for weeks due to the need to prepare, hold and restore land after festivals and other such large-scale events.

These facts may be one of the reasons why some local authorities are considering selling off small pieces of land to plug budgetary gaps rather than commercialise their parks and greenspaces.

7 How safe is our greenspace?

In the APSE survey the question was asked as to whether any local authorities might consider the sale of greenspace in the next 5 years. 80% stated that they had no intention of selling any greenspace, 20% responded that they were considering selling some areas of low maintenance greenspace, 10% were looking at the possibility of selling greenspaces and 10% stated they were looking at the possibility of selling small areas of woodlands (clearly from the percentages some were considering the possible sale of more than one land type).



It could be argued that the reference to the possible sale of greenbelt may link to the Government's grey belt proposals, where areas of land within the current greenbelt could be reclassified as grey belt. These areas could include land on the edge of existing settlements or roads, old petrol stations, car parks, quarries or derelict golf courses, which currently fall within the designated green belt. However, it will be left to local authorities to decide what will be classed as grey belt as well as brownfield sites still being given priority over grey belt sites.

Government's reasoning behind creating a grey belt is that they do not feel that *"wastelands and old car parks located on the green belt are given the same protections in national policy as rolling hills and nature spots in the green belt."*⁸

Clearly such a decision is to allow national housing targets to be met, but Government has stated that 50% of any housing built on grey belt sites must be affordable and that any land which is redefined as grey belt from within the existing green belt must be *"accompanied by a plan to improve existing green spaces and create new ones accessible to local people"* and also, *"look to ensure high environmental standards, that go above the legal minimum on biodiversity net gain must be met"*.

For local authorities who are charged with meeting local housing targets, the introduction of grey belts will result in a real challenge of balancing housing needs and ensuring green belts and by association, greenspaces, are protected from overzealous developers.

8 Vital natural capital

It is clear from the wide variety of data contained within this short report that greenspaces have a multitude of positives that they can bring. The changes in garden sizes or indeed the lack of garden provision in new builds increases the value of local greenspaces even more, and although there does not seem to be much evidence of current or previous large-scale sale of greenspace there are some potentially worrying comments beginning to appear, particularly as national policies around housebuilding could begin to change the goalposts around the sanctity of greenbelts.

From the responses the APSE survey received it was clear that there was consideration being given to the sale of greenspace in the next five years and although targets are being set for affordable housing and promises being made regarding improving greenspaces and public access these can be forgotten as circumstances change.

Climate change mitigation and increasing biodiversity levels have been given a high priority in local authorities climate change and ecological emergency plans across the UK, Targets within these plans often rely on having a sustainable and protected green infrastructure, and although what we have seen is that very little greenspace has been sold off, there has been some 'nibbling away at the edges', one of the most recent examples being the digging up of grass verges to build increased parking spaces!

The worry may be that as increasing demands are placed on local authorities for housing and industrial development, larger bites may be taken from greenspaces on the grounds that they are 'ugly' or of 'low value'. Interestingly within the grey belt definition are wastelands, golf courses and quarries, areas which some local authorities have turned into valuable biodiversity areas now teeming with wildlife. This includes an abandoned golf course turned into a wildlife haven in

⁸ <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/LLN-2024-0039/LLN-2024-0039.pdf>

Cheshire⁹ and a disused quarry transformed by natural regeneration in West Cumbria.¹⁰

Therefore, before any decisions are made on assigning areas to the grey belt, there is a need to carefully consider these 'islands of abandonment' before they are consigned for re-development.

There may also be a link between those areas which need the largest amount of affordable housing whilst at the same time being identified as those areas deficient in greenspace, and as such, greenspaces in these areas may become under a disproportionate level of pressure.

With all these competing pressures on greenspace, the benefits they bring to health and well-being, climate change, biodiversity, clean air, flood alleviation and wider ecosystem services. need to be emphasised at every available opportunity so that the surrender of such areas is not an easy option. This form of 'benefits stacking' helps increase the value of greenspace by clearly highlighting the benefits they bring to addressing the current environmental crises and wider corporate priorities.

It is to be hoped that local authorities can resist the desire to reduce their number of greenspace to help cover insufficient budgets, or to use them as income streams on the grounds that some losses are acceptable without affecting the overall provision of greenspace.

Furthermore, as population levels increase, it may be difficult to improve access to and create new green spaces against a backdrop of increasing urbanisation.

If we allow the erosion of our greenspaces, we will be poorer for it, and eventually we will suffer, for without a healthy natural environment there is no need to worry about anything else. Without greenspace, the wider natural environment and the ecosystems these spaces support, then there is nothing to sustain life in the longer term.

It is therefore incumbent upon each and every one of us to champion greenspace within our local authorities, despite all the pressures they are currently facing, they must not become the soft option or the sacrificial lamb. Natural capital, ecosystem services are just two of the weapons we can use to justify the continued security of our greenspaces as should be the sound of a songbird or the colours of woodlands in autumn. Whatever methods we use our greenspace must be conserved both now. And for future generations.

Dum spiro spero – 'while I breathe, I hope'

⁹ <https://theherdwick.com/2023/11/06/abandoned-golf-course-to-be-turned-in-wildlife-haven/>

¹⁰ <https://forestrycommission.blog.gov.uk/2024/08/20/into-the-woods-from-quarry-to-nature-reserve/>

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APSE member authorities have access to a range of membership resources to assist in delivering council services. This includes our regular advisory groups, specifically designed to bring together elected members, directors, managers and heads of service, together with trade union representatives to discuss service specific issues, innovation and new ways of delivering continuous improvement. The advisory groups are an excellent forum for sharing ideas and discussing topical service issues with colleagues from other councils throughout the UK.

Advisory groups are a free service included as part of your authority's membership of APSE and are an excellent way to network with peers in other councils. If you do not currently receive details about APSE advisory group meetings and would like to be added to our list of contacts for your service area, please email enquiries@apse.org.uk.

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Visit www.apse.org.uk for more details.



Association for Public Service Excellence
3rd floor,
Trafford House,
Chester Road, Manchester M32 0RS.
email: enquiries@apse.org.uk
telephone: 0161 772 1810
web: www.apse.org.uk

