CABE SPACE

The green information gap:

mapping the nation's green spaces

Summary

There is a major gap in the information that is publicly available about England's green spaces. Nobody knows how many green spaces there are, where they are, who owns them or what their quality is. What information that is collected is patchy and inconsistent. This is particularly true in regard to urban green spaces. Fresh thinking is needed.

We know about the different elements of the nation's green infrastructure – the parks, gardens, allotments, trees, green roofs, cemeteries, woodlands, commons, grasslands, moors and wetland areas that make it up – but without a central information source it cannot be pieced together.

Green infrastructure is critical to the functioning of towns and cities. It can; provide a beautiful, working landscape; help adapt to a changing climate by preventing floods and cooling towns and cities; clean the air; provide alternative healthy transport routes for walking and cycling; and enable the growing of food and the supply of energy closer to home. It also gives people spaces in which to play, exercise, relax and socialise and gives wildlife and biodiversity space to thrive.

But the information gap makes it extremely difficult to maintain a strategic view, co-ordinate provision, respond to changing social needs, or plan for a changing climate.

To resolve this, government departments will need to work more closely together. At least three government departments – Communities and Local Government (CLG), the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and the Department for Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) – hold and collect data on landscape morphology and character, biodiversity and wildlife habitats, and heritage and conservation. As part of the information revolution that could benefit Britain in so many ways, central government should co-ordinate a single, shared national information resource – a kind of atlas – to record in a consistent way the location, quantity, function, type and quality of green spaces. This resource should be made available to national, regional and local government.

CABE has co-ordinated a joint call for action on behalf of the green space sector and offers support to government to help achieve this.

Northala Fields, Ealing: built on previously derelict land, this innovative park was constructed using waste from nearby Wembley Stadium. Four landfill hills shield nearby homes from the noise of the adjacent A40, and provide valuable green space for residents

Northala Fields, Ealing © Form Associates Limited

Nationally nobody knows how many green spaces there are, where they are, who owns them or what their quality is

What will a national database deliver?

1 Planning for a changing climate

Co-ordinating the planning and management of green infrastructure will help urban areas adapt to the warmer, wetter climate and more extreme weather events that are projected for the UK. Successful adaptation will depend on good quality information about existing green spaces and networks. It will also enable more accurate modelling of climate change projections for towns and cities.

The East London Green Grid creates a network of interlinked, high-quality and multi-functional open spaces for East London residents and workers. Connecting urban areas to the River Thames and the green belt, the green grid concept was developed to steer planned new development, while taking into account the role of green infrastructure in water management and flood alleviation.[1]

2 Co-ordinating provision in a strategic way

Government policy emphasises a holistic and spatial approach to planning to create successful spaces and places.[2]

This means working across different sectors – environment, housing, transport and highways, education and health – to make the connection between people and places, movement and accessibility, and the natural and built environments. An accurate single source of information showing where responsibility lies for spaces and their type and use will help other sectors in using green spaces to deliver wider economic, social and environmental policy objectives.

For instance, the 'public benefit recording system' developed by the Forestry Commission and its partners is a GIS-based sites and landscape tool to measure the benefit that can be achieved from land regeneration using forestry. It provides a basis for strategic decision making because it identifies where the greatest public benefit could be achieved in regenerating sites. It also encourages partnerships across different sectors.[3]

It also makes sense to take into account the nation's entire green stock portfolio, not just that managed by local authorities. Organisations with responsibility for green space include housing associations and land trusts. Covering the entire green stock would co-ordinate more efficient delivery within and across local authority boundaries.[4]

Natural Economy Northwest provides support to the five sub-regions in the North West to develop strategic planning and investment frameworks for green infrastructure. A joint research programme involving the Northwest Regional Development Agency and Natural England brings together evidence on the multiple benefits of green infrastructure, focusing on its role in creating economic prosperity and stability. The research calculates that the North West's environment adds an estimated £2.6 billion in gross value and supports 109,000 jobs in environmental and related fields.[5]

Comfrey Project, Newcastle-upon-Tyne: group activities on allotments promote health and wellbeing among refugees and asylum seekers, while also providing the rare opportunity to grow food

Comfrey Project, Newcastle upon Tyne © Jane Sebire

1 www.cabeurl.com/57
2 *HM Government (2009) World class places: The government's strategy for improving quality of place. The Stationery Office: London*
3 www.pbrs.org.uk
4 www.cabeurl.com/59
5 www.cabeurl.com/5c and www.cabeurl.com/5b

3 Making the most of investment and funding

Green space is often seen as a burden on the public purse and not as a vital asset that needs investment and skilled management. A better understanding of the nation's entire green stock portfolio will help determine how limited sources of public funding can best be allocated and pooled to increase effectiveness.

Spending on green space is an area of data collection that has long been neglected or overlooked. Accounting methods within the public sector have meant that green assets often remain financially invisible.[6] A consistent approach to accounting and data collection would facilitate strategic management, give better value for money and track improvements over time. It would help to identify future expenditure needs and help to assess the numbers of skilled staff needed to maintain green infrastructure in the long term.

In **New Zealand,** asset management planning is recognised as good practice for parks and wider infrastructure and cultural and leisure management. Introduced in the early 1990s for roads, water, property, parks and recreation, this has improved long-term (10-year) financial planning and clarified the need to invest and consistently sustain new, refurbished and existing green space.

4 Making local services more transparent

The creation of a single information resource would help to track trends in urban land type and use over time.

The Audit Commission's area profiles make publicly available a summary of data and information on the quality of life and local services. Depending on the way that the data is stored and provided, a co-ordinated information resource on green infrastructure would complement area profiles. It would encourage public participation by giving people a transparent source of information about the quality and provision of green infrastructure in their area.

If individual green spaces are transferred to community stewardship, better information will help ensure these spaces are managed as part of a wider local network of spaces.

An information resource would also represent an efficient and practical use of taxpayers' money. Collating this information and establishing an appropriate baseline would help policymakers, practitioners in health, planning, housing, heritage, conservation, leisure and recreation, the research community and scientists.

Chelsea Grasslands (between West 15th Street and West 20th Street, looking north), The High Line, New York designed by James Corner Field Operations and Diller Scofidio + Renfro, with planting designer Piet Oudolf ©Iwan Baan, 2009.

The High Line, New York: a new linear park created from a disused elevated freight track running across the centre of Manhattan

Data collection already under way

Existing resources can be pooled to create a genuine shared national information base. Much of the basic data already exists, or will need to be collected in the immediate future to understand the impact of climate change on urban areas.

We know a lot about the nation's rural green spaces. MAGIC was the first web-based interactive map to bring together information on key rural environmental schemes and designations. Designed to meet the needs of government organisations with responsibility for environmental policymaking – DEFRA, CLG, Natural England, English Heritage, the Environment Agency and the Forestry Commission – MAGIC uses standard GIS tools to provide access to multiple sources of data in one location.[7]

It is the basic information on England's urban green spaces that remains missing. The UK Land Cover Map does not, for example, include information on different types of urban green space, instead classifying green space as just urban or suburban.[8]

And, although social landlords are responsible for the green and open spaces on the doorsteps of over two million households, these spaces are invisible in national data collection.

CABE Space is developing an inventory of nearly 17,000 individual urban green spaces, by combining data from existing national sources on the type, amount, location, quality and use of these spaces. This is the first time that this data has been collated. It represents a significant step forward in creating an accurate national picture.[9] However, this inventory will only go so far using existing national sources of data.

Other initiatives are under way and will need connecting. Natural England has started to merge national data on green infrastructure, and there are a number of reviews exploring different aspects of the nation's environmental resources. For instance, DEFRA has commissioned a national ecosystem assessment and recently announced a review of England's wildlife and ecological network.[10]

Greenspace Information for Greater London has created a standardised dataset of biodiversity and green space information for the London region, working in partnership with the Greater London Authority and local authorities. This is used to inform planning applications by providing data on the biodiversity and environmental implications of development. It highlights over and under supply of open space and changes in land use patterns. It informs assessments of green space provision to take social inclusion issues into account.

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6 www.cabeurl.com/5a
7 www.magic.gov.uk
8 www.cabeurl.com/5d
9 Forthcoming CABE programme of research scoping the state of England's urban green space and its impact on people's quality of life.
10 www.cabeurl.com/5e

What needs to happen?

The issue is not simply a lack of resources. It is one of prioritisation and co-ordination. There is a need for fresh thinking on existing data collection, interpretation and provision.

There needs to be greater collaboration across government and agencies in compiling and managing data. The lead departments – CLG, DCMS and DEFRA – all hold and collect data on landscape morphology and character, biodiversity and wildlife habitats, heritage and conservation. But there is no single inventory of green space type, nor any harmonisation between the existing data sources.

A spatial dataset is needed that can be used in GIS systems. This resource should be made available to national, regional and local government to co-ordinate strategically management and investment in green infrastructure across the country. The resource base will require close and continued management to remain accurate and valid.

This issue is recognised internationally. The United Nation's 1998 Aarhus Convention obliges public authorities to provide public access to information on the environment.

The European Landscape Convention calls for a greater integration of landscape into strategic decision making and transparency. This convention – the first international treaty on European landscape – recognises that landscape is not a matter solely for individual states. It needs to be considered in international policies and programmes.[11]

The Dutch national spatial planning policy has attracted international respect: its system is supported by a wide range of evidence including the Environmental and Nature Data Compendium which, since 1990, has brought together all data about the condition of the environment and nature in the Netherlands.[12]

Westergasfabriek, Amsterdam: this former gasworks site combines nature and water management to create a pleasant and more sustainable environment for residents and visitors

Cultuurpark Westergasfabriek, Amsterdam, landscape design by Kathryn Gustafson ©CABE/Peter Neal

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Looking for ways forward

There are a number of ways forward. Scotland is already tackling this lack of data and the approach being taken there could be replicated in England. Aerial photography has been analysed to start to identify different types of green space in around two thirds of Scottish authorities. It is supplemented by local authorities supplying data on local green space provision, using a standard proforma for categorisation. The project has improved the understanding of habitat networks and the natural heritage in inner-city areas. It has also helped to improve recreation provision.[13]

Aerial photography is available for the whole of England and this could be interpreted to provide the surface cover analysis and categorisation of urban areas which would provide essential baseline information on the type, amount and location of spaces.

Interpretation of aerial photography is one approach. In addition, there is much more local data that could be collated: local authorities should already audit all the open spaces they own as part of their open space strategy work. This data on land use is held locally but there is currently no facility for sharing beyond the local authority area.

Three steps could be taken to help achieve better information nationally:

1 The revision of planning policy guidance 17 for parks and green spaces should **prioritise the concept of green infrastructure in planning, designing and managing urban areas**. It should ask local authorities to collect information on the spaces they manage in a simple, consistent manner, and show how this could be done. Because many spaces provide multiple functions, guidance from government for consistency of land use categorisation and coding is needed.

2 Where assets are not presently recorded in national or local data collection these **gaps in data will need tackling through government or agency action**. For instance, the Homes and Communities Agency has an important role in encouraging registered social landlords to assess their green infrastructure assets and the resources dedicated to them.

3 **Better financial information needs to be collected on resourcing green infrastructure**. The National Audit Office has proposed a framework to improve local authority financial management and accounting.[14] This framework would clarify spend and demonstrate the value green infrastructure brings for towns and cities.

Flower power: green infrastructure can provide a beautiful and working landscape by allowing access to nature and giving wildlife and biodiversity space to thrive

11 www.cabeurl.com/5g
12 www.cabeurl.com/5f
13 www.cabeurl.com/5h
14 National Audit Office (2006) *Enhancing urban green space*. The Stationery Office: London.

There is a major gap in the national information about England's urban green spaces: nobody knows how many there are, where they are, who owns them or what they are like. This makes it difficult to co-ordinate provision, respond to changing social needs or plan for a changing climate. A single, shared, information resource – a kind of atlas – would help piece together the different elements of the nation's green infrastructure – parks, gardens, allotments, trees, green roofs, cemeteries, woodlands, commons, grasslands, moors and wetlands. This position paper, written for policymakers, says the new resource could be part of a wider information revolution that makes the most of our nation's green assets.

This paper is part of CABE Space's research programme scoping the state of England's urban green space and its impact on people's quality of life.

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Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment

The government's advisor on architecture, urban design and public space

CABE is the government's advisor on architecture, urban design and public space. As a public body, we encourage policymakers to create places that work for people. We help local planners apply national design policy and advise developers and architects, persuading them to put people's needs first. We show public sector clients how to commission projects that meet the needs of their users. And we seek to inspire the public to demand more from their buildings and spaces. Advising, influencing and inspiring, we work to create well-designed, welcoming places.

CABE Space is a specialist unit within CABE that aims to bring excellence to the design, management and maintenance of parks and public space in our towns and cities.

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