GREENER RECOVERY

Delivering a sustainable recovery from COVID-19

How investing in better places can support the UK's recovery from Coronavirus while tackling climate change
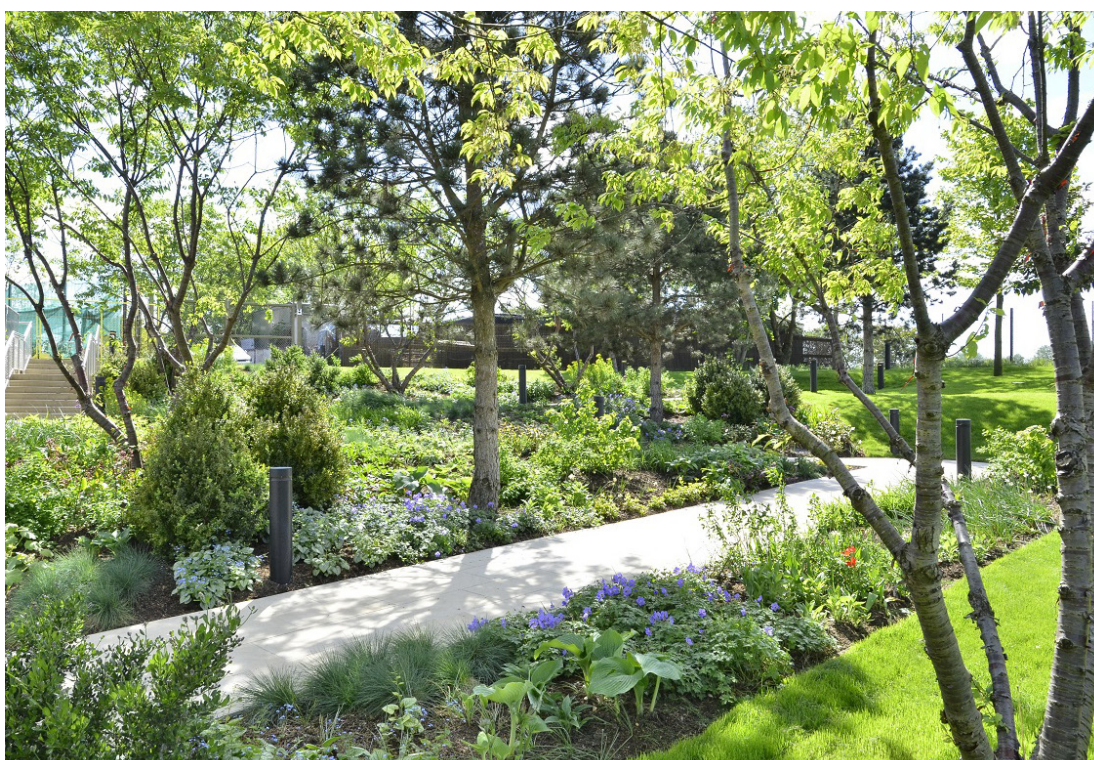
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Executive summary

In order to meet the UK's 2050 net zero carbon target, the economic and social recovery from COVID-19 must be green.

It is now widely accepted that the UK's comeback from the pandemic cannot ignore the fact that we have only a few years remaining to address climate change, and to reverse the decline in nature. An unsustainable recovery will only create new problems further down the road, and particularly the health inequalities that COVID-19 has laid bare – and which climate change will only worsen.

However, "green recovery" cannot simply be a slogan. A business-as-usual response, led by capital investment in grey infrastructure construction, will not suffice. A green recovery means leading with green, not grey, infrastructure.

Parks and green spaces need significant investment which matches their role as vital national assets. These places are pivotal in helping to build our resilience to climate change: cooling our cities, stopping air pollution and reducing health inequalities. There are projects that are both 'shovel-worthy' as well as 'shovel-ready', and a huge number of existing places in dire need of funding. Investment of £1 billion annually over the next five years would ensure existing green spaces and new ones deliver for people, place and nature.

To achieve a truly sustainable recovery, Government investment and regulatory reform around the 2020 Autumn Statement, should:

1   **Take a natural capital approach to new infrastructure and housing**

2   **Invest in maintenance and renewal of existing places**

3   **Set higher and fairer standards for green space**

4   **Invest in natural solutions to climate change**

5   **Create a step-change in green skills, digital, and data**

This paper builds from the public stimulus announcements made by the UK and devolved Governments in Summer 2020, and describes what role the landscape sector – including parks and green spaces – can play in contributing towards a sustainable economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, and what further government action may be needed to enable that.

✳ Introduction:
Green Recovery and Landscape

Previous national responses to recessions, both in the UK and overseas, have tended to focus on short-term economic growth at the expenses of longer-term sustainability – both economically and environmentally.[1] Twelve years on from the 2008 recession, the UK again needs to invest in restarting its economy – creating jobs and driving productivity – but we must also seize the opportunity to make a transformative contribution to tackling climate change.

That the economic recovery should take account of climate change has received overwhelming public and industry support,[2] and the UK government and devolved equivalents have since used the language of green recovery in their fiscal stimulus announcements.[3] However there is a third aspect, unique to this recession: the need to respond to the health challenges presented by Coronavirus – including capitalising on changes we've had to make to our public services and the physical shape of our built environment.
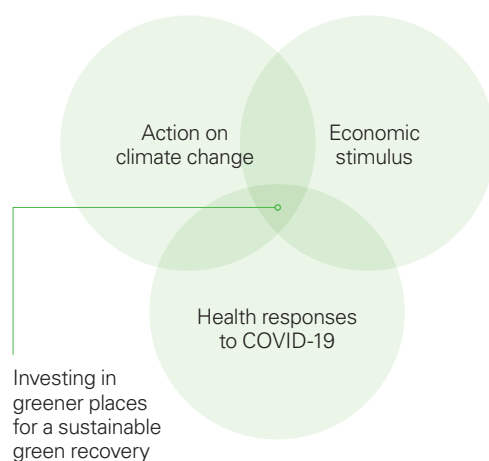
The improvement in local environmental conditions was an unexpected benefit of the COVID-19 lockdown. From increased air quality in big cities, to cleaner water and beaches, as well as better prospects for local wildlife, these are significant gains that many want to preserve in the aftermath of the crisis. Across the world we are already starting to see emissions reach pre-lockdown levels, we must seek to lock in the positive environmental outcomes. Parks and green spaces became a lifeline for millions during the lockdown, especially those without access to a garden or even a balcony, and their importance to people's wellbeing was underlined by the Chief Medical Officers of all devolved nations and the Prime Minister.

Preserving these gains is equivalent to building physical resilience to disasters including floods, droughts and other phenomena associated with a changing climate.

The economic recovery from COVID-19 must be delivered in a way which addresses the climate emergency, reduces public health inequalities and improves the quality of life for everyone in Britain. One of the best ways to achieve this is by investing in better, greener places.

Action on climate change

Economic stimulus

Health responses to COVID-19

Investing in greener places for a sustainable green recovery

Five priorities for a green recovery

1 | **Take a natural capital approach to new infrastructure and housing investment**

2 | **Invest in maintenance and renewal of existing places**

3 | **Set fairer standards for green space**

4 | **Invest in natural solutions to climate change**

5 | **Invest in green skills, digital and data**

Take a natural capital approach to new infrastructure and housing investment

To aid economic recovery we need to get Britain building: creating and repairing places that are healthy, resilient and sustainable. New or accelerated government investment can help kickstart this activity; however public investment should not be used to fund unsustainable, unhealthy, poorly-designed places, which impede our ability to meet our 2050 net zero target. Government needs to invest in schemes that are not simply 'shovel-ready', but are 'shovel-worthy'.

Government investment in infrastructure more broadly must take a natural capital approach, and ensure it delivers an environmental net gain.[4] Even a modest reallocation of the money spent on grey infrastructure could bring enormous benefits; recent research suggests that a £5.5bn investment in urban green infrastructure would generate over £200bn of physical and mental health benefits.[5] Green infrastructure (GI) projects can generate economic returns whilst providing a means of restoring nature and delivering ecosystem services.

The government announced £40m for a Green Recovery Challenge Fund at the 2020 Summer Budget,[6] but other nations are going further. The scale of GI investment should be ambitious, including landscape-scale investments in regional and city parks, new green belts, and city-wide walkways. Landscape-scale infrastructure planning, learning from Wales' Area Statements and proactive Covid-19 planning policy,[7] can ensure that we're building in the right place, and that the environment is seen as a core economic asset to be enhanced through development, rather than as a constraint to it.

To guide this investment, a landscape-led approach is essential. Involving landscape and greenspace professionals in early stage masterplanning ensures that new development is designed with people, place, and nature as a priority. Too often the spaces between buildings are an afterthought, leading to reduced community and environmental outcomes.

Whilst the quantity of new housing remains a priority, success is about more than just numbers of units. The quality of our homes and communities has come under close examination during lockdown, highlighting the importance of access to local amenities, parks and green spaces. Strengthening building standards is critical to delivering healthier homes and buildings – as is ensuring that Planning Authorities are incentivised for good placemaking and not just units.

The COVID-19 stimulus packages offer a significant opportunity to address immediate and entrenched socio-economic issues and hasten the transition to a low carbon and environmentally resilient economy. An ambitious package of green infrastructure stimulus can put the UK on track to its commitment to net zero by 2050, provide short- and long-term economic benefits, create jobs and tackle regional inequalities.

Recommendations

- Provide economic stimulus packages which accelerate the transition to a low carbon economy, by properly embedding natural capital into decision-making

- Require all publicly funded infrastructure and large-scale housing to meet high standards of environmental and social benefit, including targets for healthy green space.

- Implement a landscape-led approach to planning all new developments delivered through this funding round

- Re-orientate targets and incentives for Local Planning Authorities towards a broader set of placemaking outcomes, and ensure that the new planning reforms help deliver these

- Extend net gain policies in the Environment Bill to cover a broader range of outcomes and development types, including infrastructure

Invest in maintenance and renewal of existing places

To meet the UK's climate obligations, we must make the most of the places we've already got. Properly maintaining and retrofitting the nation's assets is as important as investing in them in the first place.

For existing green infrastructure like parks, ongoing management and maintenance is essential to maximise its many benefits. Too often, capital investment in green infrastructure (GI) is not made with full consideration of the resource needed to maintain it. Investment in maintaining these assets has declined by 24% in Scotland in the last six years,[8] and by over 40% in England in the last ten[9]. The value of developer contributions towards open space also fell by £100m between 2006 and 2017.[10] New financial frameworks are needed that recognise the importance of maintaining environmental assets, and gives local areas the flexibility to pool resources and raise finance against the ecosystem services they provide.

After COVID-19, there is set to be a major shift in the way we use spaces like the high street. Reinventing these places as green, healthy and accessible spaces will be vital to ensuring their long-term sustainability. The temporary adaptation of urban space during lockdown has shown what is possible, and we should seize the opportunity to lock-in these benefits. Re-inserting landscape back into the built environment can provide biodiversity and microclimatic benefits, improve health and wellbeing, increase community perception and solve flood management problems.

This is true of the greyest spaces – for instance through green roofs, street trees and walls in urban centres – but also of existing green space. Recent research suggests that through "underperforming" parks across the UK we are missing out on £10bn of physical health and mental wellbeing benefits.[11] We should invest in these spaces for the benefit of all.

The green recovery also provides a unique opportunity to exploit the unintended consequence of the lockdown which saw an increase in local active travel: drastically reducing traffic congestion, resulting in better air quality, improved urban environments, and reduced carbon emissions. Transport is the largest emitter of greenhouse gases in the UK. The new cycling and walking plan for England is an excellent start.[12]

It is best to design walkability and bicycle use into spaces from the outset, but the opportunity of retrofit post-COVID would create labour-intensive, localised job creation. High-quality cycling schemes cost around £1.3 million per kilometre, compared to around £50 million per kilometre for road schemes,[13] and investment in cycle and walking infrastructure was found to have the highest employment multiplier of all transport investment post-COVID.[14]

> Parks in England deliver health, climate and environmental benefits worth over £6.6bn each year including £2.2bn in avoided health costs. For every £1 spent maintaining them £7 in these benefits is returned.

Recommendations:

- Rebalance infrastructure spend from capital to revenue to ensure places and buildings can be greened, managed, and maintained

- Increase devolved powers to local areas for landscape-wide approaches to green infrastructure, to collaborate on raising finance and maintain their green assets

- Embed requirements for living roofs and walls into national planning policy and consider financial incentives for their provision,[15] including equalisation of VAT rules to encourage retrofit of existing buildings and infrastructure

- Create a step-change in sustainable drainage, by mandating SuDS as the default option for all new development, especially those supported through public investment

- Consider making permanent the reallocation of existing highway space for active transport and upgrading temporary installations with permanent greening, and make this a key strand of the upcoming Transport Decarbonisation Plan

Set fairer standards for green space

The COVD-19 pandemic has made clear the benefits of access to green space. However, access to these benefits are very unevenly distributed across the UK. 2.6m people do not live within a 10-minute walk of a park, and people living in the most economically-deprived areas are less likely to live near good quality green spaces.

Perception of accessibility has declined steadily over the last five years, and good accessibility is concentrated in affluent, white, rural areas.[16] Black people are nearly four times as likely as White people to have no access to outdoor space at home.[17] Around a third of the Scottish population lives within 500 meters of a derelict site; in deprived communities, that figure increases to 58%.[18]

The majority of engagement with nature happens not in the countryside, but in our towns and cities. And this is rising: in 2018/19, visits to green spaces in urban environments comprised 52% of all taken, up 11 percentage points since 2009/10. Urban parks are amongst the most important sites for people's connection to nature, comprising over a third (36%) of all visits per year in England.[19]

Green spaces play an important role in an urban ecosystem, providing a place for physical activity, relaxation, social interaction, community events, and so on. Local authorities that consider their parks to be a priority, which have a parks strategy in place, and an elected member as a parks champion, tend to have better parks.[20] But less than half of councils have such a plan.[21]

This is not just about the recreational benefits of green space, but is increasingly an issue of climate justice too, particularly as our cities get warmer. It's estimated that at least 40% tree canopy cover is required to mitigate Urban Heat Island (UHI) effects in any meaningful way.[22] Only one urban area in the UK meets this threshold (Farnham in Surrey), and average cover in the UK is just 16%.[23]

These green-disadvantaged areas also suffer the worst effects of air pollution,[24] a fact that is more concerning than ever in light of COVID-19, a respiratory condition. In high-traffic urban areas, green spaces can provide a place that is relatively free from air and noise pollution. Urban vegetation, if carefully designed, can remove and shield air pollutants at a local scale. The benefits of air pollutant removal by trees in public parks in England, for example, is estimated at £60 million per year.[25]

Some countries and cities are setting ambitious examples – from minimum ratios of asphalt-to-grass in Arnhem,[26] to city-wide green corridors in Medellin[27] – and there are excellent examples to build on within the UK: such as the Central Scotland Green Network or Wales' legislative framework. The Green Infrastructure Standards currently being developed by Natural England will be an important contribution to this, and they will need a firm footing in local plan policies.

Recommendations:

- Prioritise green infrastructure investment in those places which have the greatest need, to tackle persistent inequalities in our communities.

- Set national standards for quantity, quality, and accessibility of green infrastructure, covering existing GI as well as new

- To ensure that the national standards drive improvement in green infrastructure provide improvement support to local places that helps secure the benefits that flow from good quality green infrastructure.

- Set an ambitious national target for urban canopy cover, and ensure that trees promised by developers appear and survive on-site

- Ensure that homes delivered through new permitted development rights do not contribute to worsened access in deprived areas to green space and good design

Invest in natural solutions to climate change

A healthy natural environment is the foundational asset underpinning all development, and climate change puts this at risk. The right kind of investment in the natural environment will produce a range of benefits: increased biodiversity, reduced pollution, improvements for community health and wellbeing.

Investment in nature recovery would provide a major boost to the economy providing jobs and long term economic and environmental resilience. The Wildlife and Countryside Link recently highlighted 330 projects that are 'shovel ready' which with investment could provide 10,000 FTE jobs.[28] These projects across the UK could capture 100,000 tonnes of CO_2 p.a., protect and enhance 200,000ha of priority habitat. Investment in the natural environment will also provide fiscal benefits. The Natural Capital Committee recently reported that woodland planted on the outskirts of urban settlements would deliver nearly £550m per year in benefits such as recreation, carbon capture and biodiversity benefits.[29]

The Agriculture Bill Environment Bill and the Environmental Land Management (ELM) schemes can provide an important framework for delivering natural capital projects. The Agriculture Bill and subsequent ELM schemes to increase food security whilst also incentivising land managers to produce public goods that will combat environmental decline. Prioritising investment in this sector to ensure that the food and farming sector is capable of delivering public goods could provide huge economic and environmental benefits.

The Environment Bill is a generational opportunity to curb the decline in natural capital stocks on which our nation depends. A strong Bill must be passed, without the risk of being undermined by trade negotiations, to ensure that the Government's ambitions set out in the 25 Year Environment Plan are met. The Bill must be founded on the principle of non-regression from EU standards and can build on its current vision by setting targets that are ambitious, legally binding, and measurable.

Trees and woodland provide excellent value for money in relation to the multitude of benefits they supply, especially in terms of carbon capture and biodiversity gain. England's National Tree Strategy must ensure that woodland is well-located, by taking a landscape-led approach to planning, and should set targets for quality of trees rather than just quantity. The strategy and subsequent investment can protect and improve existing woodland stocks, setting targets to restore ancient and native woodland sites and enhance biosecurity.

> "This pandemic has highlighted the health inequalities our society still faces, including the largest public health threat of the century: climate change. Now is the moment to address them both"
>
> Jane Findlay,
> LI President 2020-22

Recommendations

- Invest in nature-based solutions to climate change that can deliver for jobs, nature and the economy

- Pass a strong Environment Bill which includes ambitious targets that are legally binding and measurable

- Ensure the forthcoming Agriculture Bill and Environment Land Management Schemes have environmental improvement at their heart, and support investment into a wider range of land types, including peri-urban

- Embed natural green infrastructure into infrastructure planning, including the remit of the National Infrastructure Commission, as in Scotland

- Deliver national tree strategies which set targets for long-term establishment of quality trees, recognising the need for integration into local green infrastructure plans.

Invest in green skills, digital and data

The lockdown has changed many things, including the way we work. An increase in home working has accelerated the use of digital technologies – a trend that was already beginning to change how places are built and managed, albeit slowly. This digital shift presents new challenges and demands new skills, but also has the potential to provide new solutions to climate change.

Lockdown has been disruptive, but as our economy emerges from it, we can work to ensure that this disruption leads to positive change. The landscape profession is an innovative, creative sector working within and alongside the construction industry: a sector which has suffered from low levels of innovation and productivity.[30] Simply "getting Britain building again" with no-strings-attached investment risks reverting to old ways of working; hampering innovation and leading to the same poor outcomes.

COVID-19 can provide the opportunity for making the built environment sector more digital, efficient and productive, building on the outputs of the Transforming Construction Challenge and making the most of platforms like BIM. However, it can also enable more sustainable design – if done right. This requires more and better data, and the right people using it. For instance, data on the embodied carbon of materials, or on the biodiversity potential of different habitats, can help to discourage waste-intensive, high-carbon infrastructure solutions.

This digital drive can also help with inclusive design and better engagement with local communities – again, if it is done right. For instance, making planning documents standardised/machine-readable and sharing more events online (such as committee meetings and appeal hearings) can allow a wider range of people to get involved in placemaking, as well as reducing unnecessary car travel.

None of this is possible without skilled people to deliver it. To create greener healthier cities and tackling climate change will require re-tooling

the workforce with green skills fit for the 21st century. Landscape skills – blending knowledge of the built and natural environment – are needed, but the UK still has a skills shortage in this area, as well as structural workforce issues, including a lack of diversity.[31] Recent proposals for every Local Authority to have a Chief Design and Placemaking Officer are an excellent start.[32]

A growth in landscape and green infrastructure would create and maintain thousands of green jobs: jobs that are creative, knowledge-intensive, and good for the environment. A disproportionate amount of young people and lower income individuals have been impacted by unemployment during this period; we can reskill those affected by the pandemic for new employment opportunities in the landscape sector, including through new apprenticeships.

Recommendations:

- Invest in green skills to allow those most affected by the economic downturn to reskill for a low carbon economy, and work with professional bodies to deliver training, apprenticeships, and accreditation

- Promote the National Retraining Scheme, National Skills Fund, and the Apprenticeship Levy at local level to support reskilling towards a resilient green economy

- Address sector-wide problems in the green workforce, including a lack of diversity, skills shortages, and a loss of key public sector roles

- Support data standardisation and integration in the built environment, including for embodied carbon and encouraging tracking through digital building passports

- Continue the digital momentum in planning and development, and use public investment to reward innovative low-carbon practice

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A selection of other Green Recovery papers and campaigns

International comparison index available at CarbonBrief: https://www.carbonbrief.org/coronavirus-tracking-how-the-worlds-green-recovery-plans-aim-to-cut-emissions

Climate Change Committee – 2020 progress report to Parliament:
https://www.theccc.org.uk/publication/reducing-uk-emissions-2020-progress-report-to-parliament/

BuildBackBetter Campaign: https://www.buildbackbetter.org.uk/

Green Alliance – *Blueprint for a Resilient Economy:*
https://www.green-alliance.org.uk/resources/Blueprint_for_a_resilient_economy.pdf

ADEPT: A blueprint for accelerating climate action and a green recovery at the local level:
https://www.adeptnet.org.uk/documents/blueprint-accelerating-climate-action-and-green-recovery-local-level – with Ashden, LEDNet, London Councils and the Local Government Association

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Wildlife and Countryside Link - *Rooting Recovery in Resilience*:
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Acknowledgements

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