

We are living in the strangest of times and the most unsettling of times at present. The Covid-19 pandemic has forced most of us back to our homes for work, rest and play apart from essential workers with a short list of specified activities that allow us to venture out. One of those is for daily exercise and given recent media photographs of overcrowded parks and riversides, this puts attention on the supply and demand of functional greenspaces in our pressurized urban areas and perhaps demands a rethink in the way we design and manage such places now and for the future.

The UK planning system came into being to address the poor living conditions of the urban poor and to improve their quality of life. This focus on health and well-being and social justice has been neglected and downgraded somewhat in recent planning reforms in England which prioritises housing and economic growth. The publication of the [Marmot Review](#) 10 years on re-ignites the social and environmental justice agendas which shows a significant decrease in the quality and quantity of our ability to live healthy lives. Furthermore, the health gap has increased between wealthy and deprived areas and between deprived areas. So living in a deprived area of the North East is worse for your health than living in a similarly deprived area in London, to the extent that life expectancy is nearly five years less. In some cities there is a 10-year gap over life expectancy depending on where you live.

This spatial pattern of inequality matters when we see newspapers full of photographs of people out in parks, by rivers in crowds not strictly adhering to rules of exercise. How easy is it for us to judge, when sitting in your own garden, other people who have no such luxury and greenspaces are a powerful antidote to pressures of being cooped up in lockdown.

For me this raises key issues about what we mean by “viable” developments. Presently under the [National Planning Policy Framework](#) [viability](#) is defined simply in economic terms ; the extent to which a developer can make profits from a development. Ironically if this is threatened then often it is the green infrastructure component that is deemed expendable. One lesson from the pandemic is that we need better quality LOCAL greenspace to enable exercise, recreation and contemplation. This perhaps challenges us to consider both environmental and social components of viability more effectively than hitherto in line with the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

Here access to quality green infrastructure should be seen as a core component of new housing developments but equally it needs to consider those existing developments in areas of multiple deprivation which suffer the double whammy of lack of access to quality greenspace and other core ecosystem services (e.g. pollution and noise).

In many new developments we see green space considerations and using tools such as [Building with Nature](#), [Natural Capital Planning Tool](#) and [green space factor](#) can help generate quality green infrastructure solutions along with other net environmental gains. For existing developments this is more challenging but using betterment (land value capture from award of planning permission through [community infrastructure levy](#)) and [net gain](#) strategically to enable such areas to benefit from investment in green infrastructure. However, issues over long term management highlight how, for some policy and decision makers, greenspace is still seen as a cost rather than viewed in terms of the multiple benefits it generates both for people and wider environment.

One thing we are learning from this pandemic is that people need regular access to quality green and/or blue space locally for their physical and mental health and well being and this type of investment makes a difference to demands on our national health service and other support services.

Thus, at the present time, it is plainly absurd to shut parks in any urban area for what is a failure of enforcement for a few at the expense of the majority. However, parks are major islands in an urban jungle which increasingly needs green and blue corridors to connect and support nature with people. This city greening is not something that should be seen as a places to escape the city but rather as an integral part of the city fabric. This missed connection is perhaps one reason why the green in the city is seen as an optional extra rather than critical infrastructure. Lets take the opportunity to rethink how we can create and improve places that are green and productive rediscovering why we developed a planning system in the first place.