**Parks and green spaces**

**Introduction**
Green infrastructure can be broadly defined as a strategically planned network of high quality natural and semi-natural areas with other environmental features, which is designed and managed to deliver a wide range of eco-system services and protect bio-diversity in both rural and urban settings.¹

There is mounting evidence demonstrating the contribution green spaces can make to mental and physical health and wellbeing.² Green spaces encourage:

- Social contact and integration.
- Provide space for physical activity and play.
- Improve air quality and reduce urban heat island effects (man-made area, such as cities and towns, which are significantly warmer than the surrounding countryside).¹²
- Help support social inclusion and community cohesion.²⁰

**Risk factors and vulnerable groups**
There is unequal access to green space across England. People living in the most deprived areas are less likely to live near green spaces and will therefore have fewer opportunities to experience the health benefits of green space compared with people living in less deprived areas.³³

**What is the evidence base?**
NICE has produced guidance on physical activity and the environment (PH8) which is targeted at professionals who have a direct or indirect role in, and responsibility for, the built and natural environment setting out that places should be provided where children and young people feel safe in taking part in physical activities.⁴⁵

The Faculty of Public Health published a report in 2010 on ‘Great Outdoors: How our natural health service uses green space to improve wellbeing;’ highlighting the physical and mental health benefits of using green spaces.⁷⁴

A recent PHE briefing suggests that local action to increase access to green space should include:⁷⁵

- Creating new areas of green space and improving the quality of existing green spaces.
- Increasing accessibility of green spaces and improving engagement with local people.
- Increasing the use of good quality green space for all social groups.

DEFRA has published a white paper outlining how it will protect and improve the natural environment⁷ and the National Policy Planning Framework states that access to high quality open spaces and opportunities for sport and recreation can make an important contribution to the health and wellbeing of communities.⁶
**Local picture**

The Green Flag Award Scheme (the national quality indicator for parks and green spaces) recognises and rewards the best green spaces in the country and provides the benchmark for excellence.\(^1\) Seven of Luton’s district and neighbourhood parks have achieved the Green Flag standard. The Council also manages a large number of local open spaces. These important green spaces provide a range of facilities including 47 children’s playgrounds, and an adventure play area which opened in 2011.

Access to neighbourhood urban parks and gardens in Luton is relatively good across the whole of the borough with a total of 546.68 hectares of green space. However, there is inequality in the distribution of publicly accessible green spaces across Luton.\(^78\) West and central areas have, on average, significantly less overall green space per person (Table 18). The Green Space Strategy Review\(^78\) also identified that the overall current provision of green spaces is insufficient given the multifunctional Green Space Standard\(^2\) (41.5m\(^2\)/person) and is projected to worsen given the expected growth in the population.

**Table 18: Green space per person (m\(^2\))**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>LUTON</th>
<th>North</th>
<th>East</th>
<th>South</th>
<th>West</th>
<th>Central</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Green Space per person (m(^2))</td>
<td>28.7</td>
<td>34.5</td>
<td>50.4</td>
<td>33.1</td>
<td>15.7</td>
<td>13.4</td>
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</tbody>
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Figure 23 shows the areas with no access to green space and urban parks and gardens within 5 minutes are mainly located in the central area in Biscot and Saints wards as well as larger pockets across the borough within Crawley, Icknield and Sundon Park, which also has a potential new housing site.

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1. Applications are judged against 8 criteria: A welcoming place; Healthy, safe and secure, Clean and well maintained, Sustainability, Conservation and Heritage, Community Involvement, Marketing and Management.

2. Multifunctional Green Space Standard: Amenity Green space (4m\(^2\)) + Neighbourhood Parks (7.5m\(^2\)) + District Parks (8.5m\(^2\)) + Strategic Natural and Semi-Natural Green space (5.5m\(^2\)) + District Natural and Semi-Natural Green space (4.5m\(^2\)) + Local Natural and Semi-Natural Green space (11.5m\(^2\)).
Utilisation of this outdoor space for exercise and/or health reasons has been reducing in Luton from a high of 24.5% of residents visiting the natural environment for health or exercise purposes in 2011/12 to 14.5% in 2013/14 but this is still above the statistical neighbour average of 11.5% (Figure 24).

There are 24 county wildlife sites and 13 district wildlife sites in Luton. Natural England recently indicated a desire to review sites associated with Bedfordshire chalk. Surveys of three sites in Luton have shown potential to be Designated Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). This designation comes with statutory protection.
Allotments have great potential to contribute to health and wellbeing. Allotment gardening enables people to be physically active, provides access to healthy and affordable food, has a wide range of social benefits and supports sustainability by reducing food miles. The Council has a statutory requirement to provide allotments for the public. The Green Space Strategy recommends a provision standard of $2m^2$/person. There is currently a shortfall of approximately 640 plots and it is predicted that unless further allotments are provided, there will be a significant shortfall in the period to 2031 with an estimated 949 plots shortfall for the projected growth within Luton’s boundaries. This will become even more significant if further allotments are lost to development.

What is being done locally?
Strategic work undertaken by the Green Infrastructure Consortium looks at joining the existing areas with areas of greatest opportunity (connecting the spaces to the wider countryside), historic environments and critical areas, which are now in deficit. This and the Green Space Strategy Review 2014 plan will guide the council in seeking mechanisms to improve the current provision through the creation of appropriate and accessible routes and green corridors, self-managed allotments and community gardens and improved facilities in district and neighbourhood parks to ensure a holistic approach to delivery of a local green space network to meet the needs of the community.

The Council works with a range of partners including Friends of the Park groups and local environmental trusts to deliver projects to improve green spaces and local play provision, encourage food growing and healthy eating projects, engage with volunteers in outdoor physical activities, and provide accredited education and training programmes.
**Perspective of the public/service users**
The 2014 resident’s survey shows free and cheaper activities and more local choice could encourage residents to increase their levels of physical activity. Utilising free green space is an important aspect of this. See section 9.3 for more information on physical activity.

**Priorities**

1. Improve the accessibility, connectively, bio-diversity and recreational value of existing parks, green spaces and natural areas to promote good mental health and physical activity through partnership working across departments.

2. Use healthy urban planning principles to build green and open space of recreational value into new developments to help address the shortfall of open space across Luton.
References


