Catalysing Nature Recovery for People & Nature

Research Report

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Introduction

The Oxford-Cambridge Pan-Regional Partnership commissioned this multi-faceted research project to examine how green spaces can better serve both people and nature. Funded jointly by the Oxford-Cambridge Pan-Regional Partnership and Natural England, the Catalysing Nature Recovery for People and Nature research aims to define and maximize the role of "green space" in the region's nature recovery agenda, with an emphasis on community access, health, wellbeing, inclusivity and diversity.

There is varied understanding around how "green space" is defined, what is included within these definitions, and the value of each type of green space to nature recovery. Existing definitions and initiatives often focus on protected sites and landscapes, potentially overlooking important spaces like urban parks, allotments, community gardens, transport verges and waterside paths that are managed by different sectors with varying priorities.

Delivered through a collaboration between Earth Trust, 3Keel and Sunnyhill Consultants, this project seeks to address this gap by exploring approaches to maximising the role of green spaces in nature recovery while promoting inclusive access and community wellbeing.

Acknowledgements

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Executive summary

The Catalysing Nature Recovery for People and Nature research aimed to test whether there is a need to expand how green space is defined to better support nature recovery. Through desk research, focus groups and workshops the research engaged with over 30 organisations across the region, bringing together perspectives from conservation, planning, community groups, and local government. The project explored:

- How "green space" is currently defined across different sectors and what these definitions include or exclude
- What an ideal future could look like for different types of green spaces serving both people and nature
- The key trends driving changes in how we think about and use green spaces

The research reveals significant opportunities to enhance how different sectors work together to deliver multiple benefits from green spaces - from urban parks and community gardens to transport corridors and waterside paths. It highlights the need for a more connected, holistic approach that recognises the full spectrum of spaces contributing to nature recovery and community health.

There was strong cross sector interest in this topic supporting the need for this research and ongoing involvement. Initial findings on the topic of People and Nature centred on the phrase “green spaces”, recognised as areas where people and nature come together. This research therefore explored the various definitions of green spaces, how opinions varied and the opportunities to collaborate. There were key areas of discussion around:

- Diverse views across different sectors as to what constitutes green space, particularly around the varying types, uses, setting, size, protection and definitions.
- The lack of a coherence around green spaces, particularly around definitions, value, standards, quality and planning.
- Pressures on the delivery of sustainable green spaces, particularly financially, but a feeling wider opportunities are not being optimised.
- The requirement to find a balance between people centred and nature focused green spaces; recognising some existing policies and strategies are heavily focused in one area or the other without acknowledging the cross opportunities.

There is a real opportunity for change to enable multi-functional spaces to reach their full potential by developing:

A shared vision and owned strategy for a cohesive framework of holistically defined, multifunctional and sustainably managed green spaces, delivering for people and nature through a network of connected cross-sector networks.

There was a real sense of need and urgency to collaborate, and undertake further testing with stakeholders, sectors and user groups not engaged to date, to resolve key emerging strands around:

- Significant opportunities to work **cross sector to build connected** green space networks, and a network of networks.
- Real value in creating a **cohesive** (regional, pan-regional, national) **framework**, specifically around creating a **broader, holistic definition** of green spaces, ensuring "missing" types and uses are included, within an overarching and cohesive policy framework.
- Ensuring the **multifunctional** nature of green spaces is recognised delivering for **multiple benefits**; people's health and wellbeing, nature and biodiversity, education, climate and carbon, water management and other ecosystem services.
- Unlocking and focusing **sustainable funding** from multiple sources to catalyse the impact of green spaces in different places for a variety of benefits.
- Finding a **balance between people centred and nature focused** green spaces; providing safe access, better education, and opportunities for co-creation, whilst ensuring nature thrives.

1 Background

Why is this report needed?

We need a future where nature is integral to every aspect of our lives. Engaging people in nature rich green spaces promotes health and wellbeing, while also supporting nature recovery and climate action. Greater cross-sector and system wide working is required to develop and support change at scale. We need to develop pathways for a nature recovery network that puts people at the heart of change and where people have easy access to green and blue spaces through better infrastructure, design, landscaping, buildings, local amenity spaces, and community areas.

The research question

There is varied understanding around how "green space" is defined, what is included within this definition, and the value of each 'type' of green space to nature recovery. Existing definitions, policy asks and initiatives around nature recovery tend to focus on restoring or creating protected sites and landscapes.

Important spaces for nature, people, and climate - such as urban parks, allotments, community gardens, transport verges and waterside paths - may be being overlooked. Many of these spaces are managed by different sectors, and with different priorities and agendas.

We aimed to test the need to: "expand inclusive definitions of green space to support nature recovery".

Key questions considered through the desk research, focus group and workshop included:

- Is there varied understanding around how "green space" is defined?
- What is included within these definitions? What is missing?
- What is the value of each 'type' of green space to nature recovery?
- Is there an imbalance between people and nature outcomes, for example; a focus of nature recovery on some areas and amenity use on others?
- What types of green spaces are currently overlooked by nature recovery initiatives and policies?
- Is a more inclusive/holistic definition of green space needed/required/useful?
- What might a visionary future for a range of types and uses of green spaces for people and nature look like?
- What long term trends are driving towards these changes?

Examples of green spaces definitions

There are multiple definitions of green space. Defining green space for everyone is complex.

Fields in Trust - Green space protection criteria:

- Own the space
- Space must be used for informal recreation or formal sport
- 0.2ha in size (smaller on case-by-case basis)
- Permanent public access
- (Green space where access restricted is not applicable, not are spaces owner or leased by private clubs)

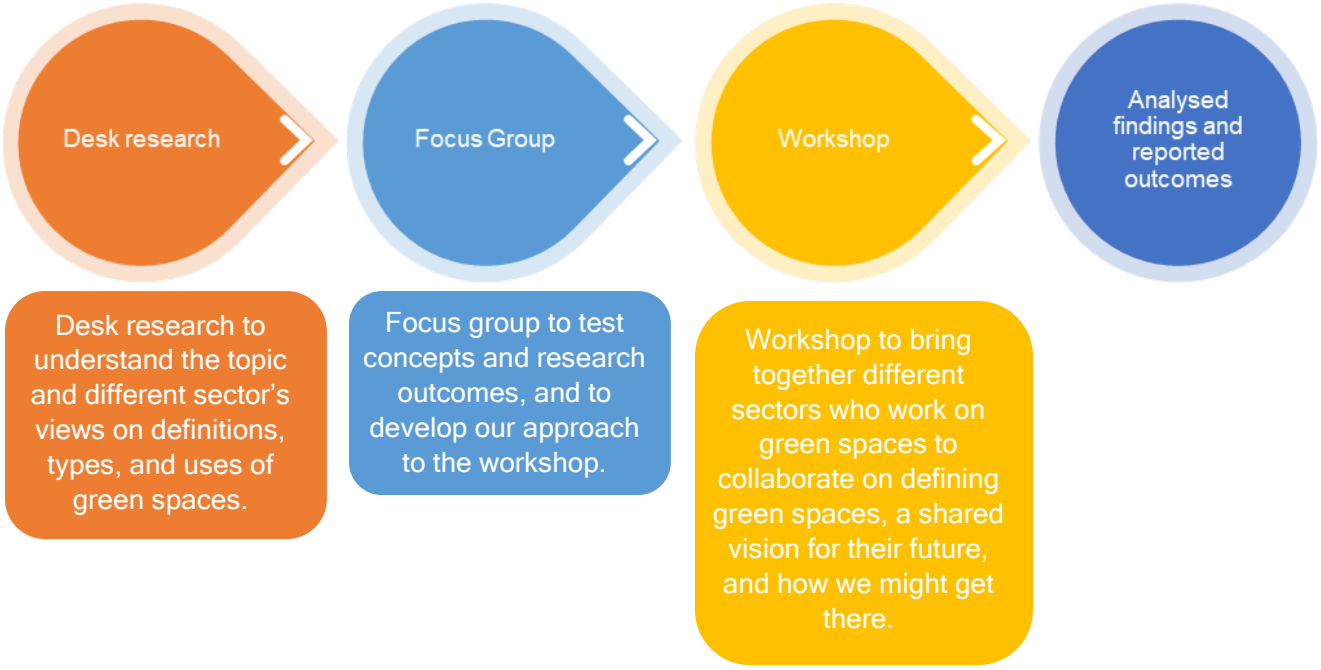
Green Infrastructure Framework - "Open space, which includes all open space of public value, can take many forms, from formal sports pitches to open areas within a development, linear corridors and country parks."

OS Maps - "Green space is defined as public parks or gardens, playing fields, play spaces, outdoor sports facilities bowling greens, cemeteries, golf courses, religious grounds, gardens allotments or community growing spaces, and tennis courts."

DLUHC - A network of multi-functional green and blue spaces and other natural features, urban and rural, which is capable of delivering a wide range of environmental, economic, health and wellbeing benefits for nature, climate, local and wider communities and prosperity'

United Utilities - "vegetation-based components such as trees, hedgerows, and permeable paving".

2 Methodology



Engagement Summary

To maximise cross sector representation from a range of different users in the landscape we identified different sectors we wished to engage with, namely: Local & Central Government; Environmental & Conservation NGOs; Institutional Landowners; Private Landowners; Landscape Practitioners; Community Groups.

The tables below show numbers of individuals and organisations considered at different stages of the research (top), and a sector breakdown (bottom).

Summary	
How many individuals were invited to the focus group?	23
How many individuals attended the focus group?	6
How many individuals did we invite to the workshop?	109
How many individuals attended the workshop?	18
How many organisations could be part of the network?	34

By Sector	Local & Central Government	Environmental & Conservation NGOs	Institutional Landowners	Private Landowners	Landscape Practitioners	Community Groups
How many individuals were invited to the focus group?	5	11	0	0	5	7
How many individuals attended the focus group?	0	4	0	0	2	2
How many organisations did we invite to the workshop?	11	31	2	12	16	20
How many organisations attended the workshop?	2	7	1	1	4	2
How many organisations could be part of the network?	5	17	1	2	9	8

Across all sectors, there was interest in the project, although some were unable to commit to attending the workshop.

On the sector breakdown, there are some sectors with a higher response rate (Environmental and Conservation NGOs) and some we had limited engagement with (Institutional Landowners).

Geographically we had good engagement from across England, with representatives from as far afield as Cumbria, Devon and Norfolk, and many representing national organisations, as well as a strong presence from those in the Ox-Cam area.

Note: This research is limited by the composition of the groups engaged, and the recommendations in this report should be considered based on this profile. We have not been able to test thinking out with different socio-economic groups, cultures and communities.

3. Initial focus group and workshop outputs

Focus group - testing concepts and developing our approach

It became clear during the focus group that people had a different vision for the future of green spaces, based on their understanding and areas of work.

Definitions: There are lots of definitions of green space. The context for varying definitions was highlighted – sometimes different definitions are used for different audiences, ranging from highly specific guidance to general overviews. Views on whether green spaces must be publicly accessible were varied.

Types and uses: Some types and uses of spaces are often overlooked. The overlaps between different types and uses are important to consider.

Challenges: Sustainable financial delivery challenges were identified. A lack of understanding and supportive research proving the benefits of green spaces to all sectors means planners face challenges in advocating for green infrastructure. Environmental issues are considered separate to public health issues.

Workshop – collaborating to catalyse solutions

There was a diversity of perspectives in the room, drawing from participant's current role and previous experience. Participants generally felt comfortable to share their opinions.

Definitions: Shared principles of a definition of 'green space' were highlighted, whilst acknowledging there are still challenges to agreeing a shared definition.

Types and uses: Many different types and uses of green spaces, the variability within and overlaps between types and uses were highlighted.

Long term vision: There are some clear aspects to build a shared vision of the future of green spaces: green spaces are multifunctional and reach their full potential.

How we get there: The groups identified ways of progressing towards their vision, including both shorter- and longer-term suggestions.

Workshop output:

Types and uses of green space

Workshop participants consider a wide range of types of green spaces and use green spaces for a wide variety of purposes.

During all stages of this research, **many different types and uses** of green spaces were named and identified. This proves there's considerable potential for **broadening the definition** of the uses of green spaces for nature and people.

The question of whether any types of green spaces are overlooked proved insightful, with the research suggesting that **certain types of green spaces are more overlooked and undervalued than others**. For example, allotments do not have the same levels of legal protections as other types of green spaces.

As highlighted on the "uses" word cloud, **green spaces are not just for people and nature, but also for carbon and other ecosystem services**. Often, the same spaces have multiple uses, suggesting that green spaces should be considered as **multifunctional**.

Word clouds from the workshop outputs. Types (top) and uses of green space (bottom).

Note: The larger the word or phrase, the more often it was mentioned by the workshop participants in flip-chart notes. Word size may not correspond to how many times a word was mentioned within discussions.

A potential shared vision for the future of green spaces:

Green space sector practitioners **collaborate** to create **connected networks**. There is a facility to enable the overseeing of green spaces. This enables a joined-up and connected approach to their management for nature and people, includes policy alignment, and new ways of working beyond political cycles.

Green spaces **deliver different high-quality outcomes** in different places. This encompasses the variability in use and management of **all types of green spaces** by different groups of society. This also includes spatially applicable and measurable outcomes for green spaces, for example nature recovery goals.

There are **minimum criteria** that all green spaces must meet.

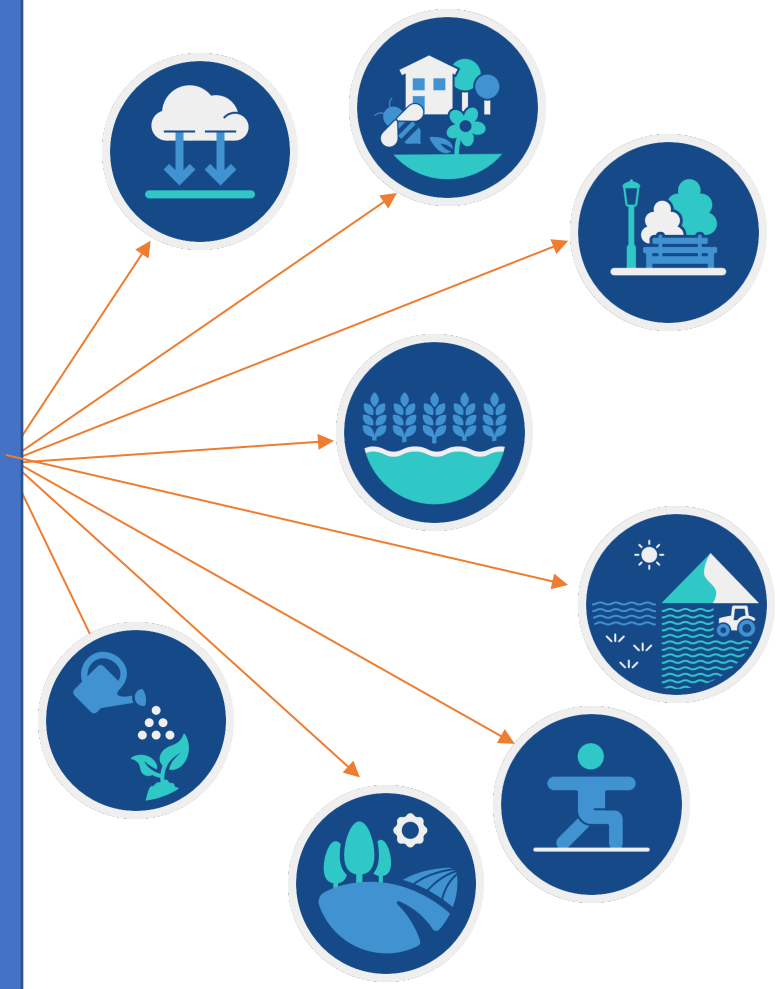
There is a **sustainable approach to financing** green spaces. There is a cohesive approach to deliver the best possible outcomes for people and nature, considering mechanisms beyond BNG.

Nature is **integrated** into our daily lives, facilitating community participation and stewardship. Green spaces become more accessible and meaningful.

There is **safe access** to green space. Their character and uniqueness is preserved. The management of green spaces is adaptable, to allow for contextual sensitivity.

There is **better education** on green spaces. People in the future have an improved relationship with nature, and a **greater appreciation** for their environment.

More **physical** aspects are considered. Green spaces are places where people can grow food, see the stars, climb trees, and go fishing.



4 Analysis and Findings

Analysis and findings: Overall strands:

There is a real opportunity for change to enable multi-functional spaces to reach their full potential by developing a **shared vision and owned strategy**. Four overall strands emerged:

1. The advantages of **connected cross sector networks**.
2. The benefits a **cohesive framework** could bring, including a **holistic definition** of green space.
3. The need for a **sustainable financial delivery model**.
4. The requirement to ensure a **people centred and nature balanced approach**.

More detailed analysis of each of these emerging strands is in the following slides.

Connected cross sector networks

There are diverse views across different sectors as to what constitutes green space, particularly around the varying types, uses, setting, size, protection and definitions:

- Green spaces are **multifunctional,** the same spaces have multiple uses; for health, nature, education, climate and other ecosystem services. Some spaces have different uses and may not have to deliver every function, they could even be defined by their use or function.
- **Blue spaces are an important part of the holistic approach to green spaces** must be considered.
- Need to recognise the difference in green spaces between **rural and urban** settings.
- **Size** is irrelevant for something to be considered a green space.
- Many different **types and uses** of green spaces exist, some are often overlooked and undervalued.
- There is inequality in **legal protection** between types of green spaces and their potential to be legally protected. However, including all types of green spaces enhances their importance and value.
- Some sectors and organisations **do not use specific definitions** and may instead be encouraged to define green space themselves.

Cohesive framework

There is a lack of a coherence around green spaces, particularly around definitions, value, standards, quality and planning:

- There are **lots of definitions** of green space. Sometimes different definitions are used for different audiences, ranging from highly specific guidance to general overviews.
- There is considerable potential for **broadening the definition** of the types and uses of green spaces considered for nature and people, and the overlaps between.
- There is a need to move away from **specific definitions** that align with the aims of people or projects.
- Green spaces are not always **valued** for all the functions they provide, opportunity to widen the value.
- There are currently no specific **standards** that green spaces should meet to be defined as a green space.
- During the research, different opinions arose on whether the **quality** of the green space matters. This highlighted the variability in use and management of all types of green spaces by different groups of society. A set of minimum standards would enable the delivery of different quality outcomes in different places.
- There are fragmented **planning** policies across governments, government departments, and political parties. There is no national institution to oversee green spaces.

Sustainable financial delivery model

There are pressures on the delivery of sustainable green spaces, particularly financially, but including wider opportunities:

- It's complex to include ownership, management and accountability for land management, but important for **future management and maintenance,** particularly the differences of ownership between local authorities, eNGOs, private landowners and community groups.
- **Long term** management, including monitoring and adaptation must be considered.
- A lack of understanding and **supportive research** proving the benefits of green spaces to all sectors means planners face challenges in advocating for green infrastructure.
- Environmental issues are considered separate to **public health** issues.
- **Technology** is not being used to its full potential. **Data** is often commercial and not open source, and media is fragmented.
- There is limited facility for **knowledge sharing**, particularly between local authorities.
- There is **increased pressure** on green spaces, for example; due to some unforeseen impacts of climate change.

People and nature balanced approach

There is a requirement to find a balance between people centred and nature focused green spaces, providing safe access (physical, technological and visual), better education, and opportunities for co-creation:

- Divergent opinions of whether green spaces should always be **publicly accessible,** where some (landscape architects) saw green space as any space between buildings whilst others (NGOs) championed the need for green spaces to be publicly accessible.
- The variety of types of green spaces (see word cloud) list many that have no physical public access but as nonetheless important for nature recovery, climate and public health – e.g., private gardens, farmland, green roofs, rail verges, golf courses, allotments, etc… Green spaces that are not physically accessible still have enormous **value** for nature and mental wellbeing and should be considered, e.g. views from hospital windows, webcam nest boxes and garden bird counts.
- The concept of **safety** as a potentially important part of the definition is sometimes missing. Safety concerns can create barriers to access and mean that some spaces could be excluded from a community's definition of green space.
- The need for **better** shared understanding and **education** on green spaces, and their benefits for public health, climate and nature, compounded by a lack of access to green space.
- The opportunity for places and definitions to be **co-created** for different places and cultures.
- The ability of green spaces to provide more **physical** aspects; places where people can grow food, see the stars, climb trees…

5 Recommendations

Overall Recommendations:

"A shared vision and owned strategy for a cohesive framework of holistically defined, multifunctional and sustainably managed green spaces, delivering for people and nature through a network of connected cross-sector networks."

There is an opportunity for change within the sector to enable multi-functional spaces to reach their full potential. These recommendations around the key emerging strands aim to ultimately enable a holistic view and whole system thinking based on a shared vision and owned strategy.

1. **Connected cross sector networks**.
2. **A cohesive framework of holistically defined green spaces.**
3. **A sustainable financial delivery model**.
4. **A people centred and nature balanced approach**.

More detailed recommendations based around each of these strands are in the following slides.

Connected cross sector networks

There are significant opportunities to work cross sector to build connected green space networks:

- Build on the indicative support for cross sector collaboration with organisations and individuals involved in this research to create a **network of networks;** a broader network of green spaces and a network of individuals and organisations**.**
- Ensure green spaces are **multifunctional**, delivering multiple benefits for; people's health and wellbeing, nature and biodiversity, education, climate and carbon, water management and other ecosystem services. Some spaces have different uses and may not have to deliver every function, they could even be defined by their use or function.
- Inclusive of all **green and blue spaces**, regardless of **size,** from smaller pockets of green spaces in cities to large rural nature reserves. Ensure the often **overlooked and undervalued spaces** are included.
- Connected, joining up **urban and rural** environments, such as the garden city movement.
- Test different governance mechanisms, which aim to encourage **collaboration** across boundaries, and community stewardship.
- Work towards equality in **legal protection** between types of green spaces and their potential to be legally protected, for example, allotments.
- Provide **training** to upskill people working in the green space sector in finance, commercial aspects, and land management.
- **Further testing** with stakeholders, sectors and user groups not engaged to date to ensure all parts of the system is analysed and understood.

A cohesive framework

There is real value in creating a cohesive (regional, pan-regional, national) framework to:

- Create a **broader, holistic definition** of green spaces ensuring "missing" types and uses are included, with a clear understanding of the overlaps between and what this unlocks. *See next slide for "principles of a shared definition".*
- **Map and analyse the systems, processes, policies and drivers** to understand the whole system picture, who are the thought leaders and champions and where the connectivity exists and/or needs filling.
- Develop an **overarching and cohesive policy framework** for the future of green spaces which:
    - Defines an agreed set of **quality and minimum standards**, with targets (legislated where possible). Models such as the green flag award could help shape. Legal protection could be linked to these standards,
    - Contains updated policies on **planning** for development, housing and green space provision. E.g., green spaces more prioritised in planning, or a ***'Green Space/Nature Net Gain'*** metric, with detailed enforcement to ensure effectiveness.
    - Sees all green spaces **valued** as a national good for the variety and multiple benefits they deliver,
    - Provides **cohesion in legislation, policy alignment and integration**, at all levels,
    - Goes **above politics** and sets out a national position, For example, an all-party parliamentary group on the stewardship of green spaces. Works **cross sector/department** to catalyse progress towards nature recovery, health and climate: including the role of BNG, support for LNRS and plans, planning and legislation,
    - Has a mechanism to enable **long term maintenance and stewardship** linked to planning law.
- Introduce **green space champions**, to potentially overcome the temporal challenges with the political cycle and front up better awareness and education about opportunities for nature recovery, health and climate. A champion could also be in the form of a 'Minister for green space'.

Principles of a shared definition

A broader, holistic definition of green spaces should recognise:

1. Green spaces are **multifunctional,** delivering multiple benefits for; people's health and wellbeing, nature and biodiversity, education, climate and carbon, water management and other ecosystem services. Some spaces have different uses and may not have to deliver every function, they could even be defined by their use or function.
2. There is a wide **diversity of types** of green spaces, particularly across different sectors, a holistic definition should include the variety and ensure "missing" types are included.
3. That green spaces should also include **blue spaces**, include all areas from **urban to rural**, and not be limited to **size**; small urban community gardens, wild mountain peaks and windswept coastal beaches are all **valued** green spaces.
4. That **safety** is an important part of any definition that is sometimes missing. Safety concerns can create barriers to access and mean that some spaces could be excluded from a community's definition of green space.
5. That an agreed set of **quality and minimum standards**, with targets (legislated where possible) can help. Legal protection could be linked to these standards.
6. It's important to include accountability for land **management and future maintenance**, highlighting the need to specify for example the landowner or the community.
7. This goes beyond political and geographical boundaries, it should be **cross sector/department** to catalyse progress towards nature recovery, health and climate in a **connected** way, not creating islands.

A sustainable financial delivery model

There is a need to build on the cross sector and cohesive framework strands, to unlock and focus sustainable funding from multiple sources to catalyse the impact of green spaces in different places for a variety of benefits:

- Create a sustainable financial delivery model/mechanism, to enable long term **management and maintenance** of green spaces. This should include:
    - Evaluation of existing **landscape scale approaches/mechanisms** in the UK and beyond. This could allow projects and their funding requirements to be amalgamated and smooth the process of fundraising.
    - Ensuring all benefits are considered to enable **co-funding**, especially for local authorities, for example; environmental and public health.
    - A **blended finance approach**, with clear aims for either green finance or green commerce, i.e. buying outcomes vs a return on capital.
    - Optimising the use of the **credits market** in different types of green spaces, through BNG, carbon codes, and other potential mechanisms. A new metric for *'Green Space/Nature Net Gain'* could facilitate this.
- Maximise the use of all available **technology** and **data sharing** opportunities for example:

    - A database including all types of green space, both public and private.
    - A network to facilitate knowledge sharing, for example sharing successful methods of increasing accessibility to green spaces.
    - Open data and wider use of GIS to raise awareness of green spaces and their benefits, in media.
- Development of a **supportive research** programme proving the benefits of all the different types of green spaces to a range of sectors. For example, research into the climate change benefits of smaller sized spaces.
- Develop a facility for **knowledge sharing**, particularly between local authorities.
- Ensure all actions are considered in a **long-term** view, particularly in relation to unforeseen impacts of climate change and necessary **adaptation**.
- Acknowledge the differences of **ownership** between local authorities, eNGOs, private landowners and community groups has regarding ongoing maintenance costs.

A people & nature balanced approach

There is a requirement to find a balance between people centred and nature focused green spaces:

- Acknowledge **public access** to green spaces is important, but that a wide variety of types of green spaces exist with many not being publicly accessible (private gardens, farmland, green roofs, nature reserve refuge areas, etc..). Ensure a balance between public access and nature benefits is optimised, alongside other outputs of green spaces for climate, health and other ecosystem services.
- **Remove accessibility barriers**, explore ways that technology and media can be used to simply and meaningfully convey how accessible green spaces are to different groups of people.
- Provide **safe** access to green spaces. Safety concerns can create barriers to access and mean that some spaces could be excluded from a community's definition of green space. Test whether safety standards for green spaces are helpful to all groups of people. These standards could include increased regulations on lighting, and other topics to be discussed with a working group. In balance places should not be sanitised, they should provide opportunities for more **physical** aspects; places where people can grow food, climb trees and see the stars.
- Develop policies and working practices that aim to increase the **integration of nature into people's daily lives**.
- Provides more **connectedness** for people with green spaces, embracing the multi-functionality and the transition in land management thinking.
- Provide regulated **environmental education**, including the stewardship of green spaces. This education should create an understanding of the value of green spaces, their benefits for public health, climate and nature, taught in environments where students have easy access green spaces. For example, green spaces and their importance for nature and people could be included on the national curriculum all the way through school.
- Provide opportunities for **communities and future generations to co-create** new and improved green spaces in the places they live, taking into account different places and cultures.

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