



House of Commons  
Committee of Public Accounts

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# Enhancing urban green space

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**Fifty–eighth Report of  
Session 2005–06**

*Report, together with formal minutes,  
oral and written evidence*

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## The Committee of Public Accounts

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### Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee is Mark Etherton (Clerk), Christine Randall (Committee Assistant), Emma Sawyer (Committee Assistant), Pam Morris (Secretary), and Luke Robinson (Media Officer).

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## Summary

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Good quality green space enhances the quality of urban life and contributes to wider Government objectives such as improved health, more sustainable neighbourhood renewal and better community cohesion, especially in more deprived communities. Neglected parks attract anti-social behaviour and have the potential to undermine regeneration of deprived neighbourhoods.

Up until recently, the quality and management of urban green space was regarded as the exclusive responsibility of local authorities and other local agencies. But in response to the findings of a 1999 Select Committee report which noted a general decline in the quality of green space, central government decided to intervene. The Department for Communities and Local Government (formerly the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister) now leads a number of initiatives to raise the profile of green space and enhance its quality.

These initiatives have helped to bring about a halt in the decline of the quality of green space in many neighbourhoods. The number of residents satisfied has risen and is over 60%. However one in six urban local authorities say their green space is in decline. A national target has been set for resident satisfaction with green space, but achievement of the target masks continuing dissatisfaction in a large number of neighbourhoods. Over 90% of urban authorities have satisfaction levels of 60% or more, but residents in deprived communities have not shared equally in the improvements seen. Central support, advice and funding needs to be better targeted at poorer performing local authorities.

The Department does not know whether the amount of urban green space is shrinking or growing. To help balance the needs of urban development and green space provision, planning authorities need to develop a vision of the value and role of green space which is shared by local partners and citizens. Yet many planning authorities are making decisions in an information vacuum and have yet to conduct a full analysis of their current provision and/or local needs as required by Planning Policy Guidance Note 17. Only 38% of urban local authorities have adopted a green space strategy and those that do exist are often weak, failing to prioritise spending options, set out clear allocation of responsibilities or provide timetables for implementation.

As schemes like the renovation of Sheffield Botanical Gardens show, community groups have played a commendable part in bringing about improvement in green spaces, large and small. Yet not all local authorities have consulted widely, and the needs of children in particular are often not well reflected in councils' green space priorities. Green space managers need to be equipped with the necessary skills to engage communities and especially children and young people, and develop a local vision for green space but the Department has made slow progress in developing an appropriate national skills programme to address these needs.

Almost a quarter of the £693 million funding made available each year for green space is now provided through direct grants from central government and the national lottery. The large number of funding programmes each with their own objectives and criteria need to be rationalised to reduce bureaucracy. A commitment to maintenance should be a

condition of funding for refurbishment and capital improvement schemes. Some local authorities spend five times as much as others maintaining their green space, and there is scope for improved efficiency. Green space managers need to better demonstrate the value for money with which they use resources by improving local financial management and reporting. Key lessons from central government funded projects to encourage local authorities to be innovative in their management of green space need to be fully identified and spread.

On the basis of the Report<sup>1</sup> by the Comptroller and Auditor General, the Committee examined the Department for Communities and Local Government, CABE Space and Groundwork UK on their initiatives and performance in enhancing urban green space.

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1 C&AG's Report, *Enhancing Urban Green Space* (HC 935, Session 2005–06)

## Conclusions and recommendations

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1. **A majority of residents in every urban local authority are satisfied or very satisfied with their local green space, with nine in ten authorities having satisfaction levels of over 60%.** In one in ten authorities, however, satisfaction levels have not risen over time and remain well below the national average. The Department should encourage local authorities to develop locally-owned, green space targets within Local Area Agreements. These should be supported by consultation with local communities on what they consider should be the priorities for improving the quality and safety of their public spaces.
2. **In one in six urban local authorities the quality of green space is declining.** New sources<sup>2</sup> of funds and better central government advocacy have helped to halt and in some places reverse, a significant decline in the quality of urban green space. Improvement is, however, not universal. The Department should target its financial and advisory support to help those areas most in need, particularly those with high levels of social deprivation.
3. **65% of local authorities have not yet completed an audit of current provision and 70% have yet to make an assessment of future needs, increasing the risk that resources are not used cost effectively.** The Department should make the production of robust assessments a condition of central government grants and encourage other funders such as the lottery distribution boards to do so too.
4. **There is a wide range in the quality of local authority green or open space plans.** For example, local authorities need help to improve their coverage of green space owned and managed by other organisations; consideration of the needs of all users of green space; and setting a minimum standard for access to green space.
5. **Two thirds of local authorities had not considered the needs of children and teenagers.** Access to green space is important in helping to promote good health in children. But young people and their parents are unlikely to use green spaces for sport and recreation if they are unattractive or unsafe. Parents' fears over safety should be allayed by having staff on duty who are visible, accessible and trained in leisure activities.
6. **There is a lack of reliable data on how much green space is available and whether it is increasing or decreasing.** As there is no statutory requirement for local authorities to provide good quality urban green space, it can receive less attention. At the same time pressures for additional housing and business makes urban green space attractive as potential development sites. The Department should, with local authorities, accelerate the development of the new green space database, to establish a consistent baseline on the total amount of public green space in England and its distribution, particularly in deprived areas.

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2 For example, the Lottery Distribution Bodies made £58 million available for green space projects in 2004–05.

7. **Some local authorities spend five times as much as others maintaining their green space, and there is scope for improved efficiency.** Lack of consistency in the way local authorities record expenditure on green spaces prevents benchmarking of costs to provide assurance that value for money is achieved. The Department should encourage local authorities to follow the framework recommended by the C&AG to record and analyse the costs of managing their green space.
8. **Skills shortages are a significant barrier to the improvement of green space.** Green space management is too often treated as a Cinderella service and underrepresented in important decision making. CABE Space should address the need to equip managers with the skills to think strategically and engage successfully with communities to raise the profile of green space, as it develops the national skills strategy for delivering and supporting improvements in green space.
9. **Key lessons from central government funded projects to encourage local authorities to be innovative in their management of green space have yet to be fully identified and spread.** The Department should identify and spread good practice from the Liveability Fund pilots and the Living Spaces scheme. It should, through its websites, provide easily accessible information on how to set up and organise a community group together with innovative examples of successful renewal of green space. It should also provide one-stop shop information on how community groups can access advice and funding and present clearer and more immediate guidance on eligibility criteria for funds.



# 1 Better planning

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1. Good quality green space plays a vital role in enhancing the quality of urban life. Urban green spaces help to make neighbourhoods more attractive to live in and provide opportunities for city dwellers to relax, take exercise, play sport and meet friends and neighbours. The existence of high quality urban green space contributes to wider government objectives such as improved health, more sustainable neighbourhood renewal and better community cohesion, especially in more deprived communities. Green space in towns offers a significant environmental benefit, including pollution control, water management, wildlife havens and biodiversity.<sup>3</sup>

2. The pressure for additional housing and businesses in towns and cities makes existing urban green space attractive as potential development sites. The Department was unable to tell us whether the amount of publicly accessible green space is shrinking or growing. The existing data<sup>4</sup> relate to 2001 and do not distinguish between agricultural green space, parks and children's play spaces. Later this year the Department plans to issue data relating to 2005. The Department is also working with Ordnance Survey and local authorities on a database which will log the amount of green space in a more detailed typology. The collection of this more detailed data is crucial if the Department is to understand the scale and pattern of housing development pressure on green space and offer effective direction and support to local authorities.<sup>5</sup>

3. The Department's policy is that the majority of new housing developments should be built on previously developed land. Though public green spaces are generally classified as 'greenfield sites', private gardens in towns and cities, despite being environmentally important, are classified as previously developed residential land. In 2004 22% of housing was constructed on land which was previously classified as residential but there is no data on how much of this land was previously privately owned green space.<sup>6</sup>

4. To help balance the needs of urban development and green space provision, planning authorities need to develop a vision of the value and role of green space which is shared by local key partners and citizens and is clear to developers. This in turn needs to be based on a rigorous assessment of the adequacy of existing green space provision and the ways it might, if necessary, be improved.<sup>7</sup>

5. Planning Policy Guidance Note 17 (Planning for Open Space, Sport and Recreation) sets out the Department's requirements of local authorities. They are required to plan for open space by undertaking robust assessments of their communities' needs and current provision. However, the Guidance Note does not spell out when this work should be completed. Four years since Planning Policy Guidance 17 was introduced, one in three

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3 C&AG's Report, paras 1.1, 1.7, Fig 10; Qq 44–47

4 The Generalised Land Use Database; Ev 16

5 C&AG's Report, paras 4.20–4.21; Qq 48–51, 60–63

6 Qq 52–62; Ev 16

7 C&AG's Report, para 4.11–4.12, 4.15, Fig 55; Q 53

urban authorities have not yet started to assess need and one in five have yet to begin to audit current provision.<sup>8</sup>

6. Planning Policy Guidance 17 sets out the criteria local authorities should use in assessing proposals for development on urban green space. But without a full assessment of need and provision, local authorities risk making decisions without a sound evidence base. Not all authorities have an accurate record of all the green spaces for which they are responsible.<sup>9</sup>

7. An assessment of local need, and audit of current provision are the basic building blocks of a well-developed and evidence based strategy. Green space strategies should help to articulate a local authority's vision for green space and the contribution it makes to other services (such as health, social care, safety, education) and the goals the authority wants to achieve, plus the resources, methods and time needed to meet these goals. There is no statutory requirement upon local authorities to produce a written strategy. Nor does planning guidance include an explicit requirement for such a document. Only 38% of local authorities have formally adopted such strategies.<sup>10</sup>

8. Where local authorities have built upon their assessments of need and provision by developing a green or open space strategy there is a wide range in the quality of these plans. For example, local authorities need help to improve their coverage of green space owned and managed by other organisations; consideration of the needs of all users of green space, matched to the socio-economic profile of the area; and setting a minimum standard for access to green space.<sup>11</sup>

9. Harnessing the power of local communities in the improvement and upkeep of their local green spaces can encourage a sense of ownership and local pride, and draw in additional resources – people power as well as money. Groundwork has the capacity to engage with communities in a way a government department or a non-departmental public body cannot do.<sup>12</sup>

10. Although many local authorities appear committed to consulting local people about green space priorities, they have not always consulted widely or in the most effective way. The 2004 review of children's play opportunities carried out by Rt Hon Frank Dobson MP, '*Getting Serious About Play*', showed that children have very particular requirements for green space. However we found their needs are seldom well reflected in councils' green space priorities. Co-ordination between green space decisions and early-years and play strategies is poor, and two-thirds of local authorities have failed to consider special provision for children and teenagers.<sup>13</sup>

11. CABE Space is working with the Children's Play Council to improve play strategies and the links between them and green space strategies. CABE Space has also begun to address parent's concerns and children's safety by encouraging local authorities to provide a visible

8 C&AG's Report, paras 4.11–4.13, Fig 55; Q 71

9 C&AG's Report, paras 4.4–4.6; Qq 31–36, 53

10 C&AG's Report, paras 4.12, 4.15–4.16, Figs 53 and 56; Qq 38–41

11 C&AG's Report, para 4.18–4.19, Fig 58; Qq 9, 66, 79

12 C&AG's Report, paras 2.26–2.28; Qq 69, 75–76, 86

13 C&AG's Report, paras 2.29–2.30, 4.18–4.19, Fig 58; Qq 64–66, 93; Ev 16-17

staff presence in parks (the 'Parkforce' campaign). This is welcome, but more could be done by the Department and CABI Space to highlight good practice in engaging with the local community, particularly young people, and the best ways of getting them involved.<sup>14</sup>

## 2 Better central support and targeting

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12. Following the report of the Urban Green Spaces Taskforce in 1999, the Government acknowledged that in general the quality of green space had declined in recent years. The Government committed to a vision of a network of quality green spaces for all communities and a programme of work to bring about improvements. It committed itself to national targets to achieve measurable improvement by 2008 and to bring about more sustainable improvements, and acknowledged the need to improve skills.<sup>15</sup>

13. Overall, the decline in green space quality has been halted, and there are signs of recovery in many places. But the rate of improvement is uneven. In around one in six urban authorities, parks managers believe their green space is in decline.<sup>16</sup>

14. The Department has set a national target for resident satisfaction with green space. Aggregate resident satisfaction has improved since 2000. However the likely achievement of the target will mask continuing dissatisfaction in a large number of neighbourhoods. Nearly 10% of authorities have satisfaction levels of 60% or less, against the national target of 75%.<sup>17</sup>

15. The Department aims to close the gap between the satisfaction levels of residents in deprived neighbourhoods and those elsewhere. These neighbourhoods face a greater problem as their green space was in a worse condition in 2000 and the demands made on their green space are often higher.<sup>18</sup>

16. However residents in deprived communities have not, in general, shared equally in the improvement seen (**Figure 1**), although this picture is not universal. Some of the poorest satisfaction levels are found in areas that are not classified as deprived whereas some deprived areas are already achieving high quality green space.<sup>19</sup>

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15 C&AG's Report, paras 1.4–1.7

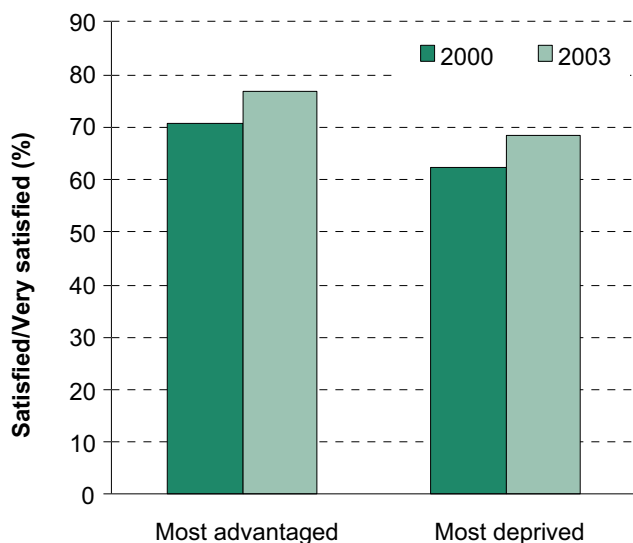
16 *ibid*, paras 2.4, 2.12–2.15; Q 3

17 C&AG's Report, paras 2.5–2.9, 2.12, Fig 18

18 Qq 15–16

19 C&AG's Report, para 2.13, Fig 21; Q 18

Figure 1: The most deprived local authorities are still lagging behind in resident satisfaction



Source: National Audit Office analysis of Best Value data

17. The Green Flag Award scheme began in 1996 as a means of recognising and rewarding the best green spaces in the country. The scheme is administered by the Civic Trust. Awards are given on an annual basis and recognise excellence in eight key areas, such as community involvement, maintenance and management.<sup>20</sup>

18. The Department has set a target to increase the proportion of local authorities nationally with at least one park or green space that meets the Green Flag Award standard. Although the target is likely to be achieved, green flag accredited space is rare with only 7.3 green flags spaces for every million people. Access is uneven across the country with large regional variations. The North West is particularly well endowed and the West Midlands has relatively few. In 2005, 15 authorities won over 100 green flags awards between them. The Department needs to work with the Civic Trust to encourage local authorities in those areas without green flags to participate and to achieve a more even regional spread.<sup>21</sup>

19. Although progress is being made towards the two national targets laid out in Public Service Agreement 8, we are concerned that the national target framework does not have the power to pull up standards of poorly performing local authorities. As written, the two targets do not single out poorly performing local authorities and track improvements where they are most needed. The current targets can be met by continuing improvement in areas where the quality of green space is already high. The Department needs to use the National Audit Office analysis to target its advice and support better at the poorest performing local authorities so they catch up faster.<sup>22</sup>

20. The Urban Green Space Taskforce noted that skills issues were holding back improvements in green space quality. Regrettably, this is still the case. CAFE Space, set up in 2003 to act as a general champion and advocate of green space, commissioned research

20 C&AG's Report, paras 2.16–2.17, Fig 23

21 *ibid*, paras 2.5–2.9, 2.21–2.22, Fig 18; Qq 89, 98

22 C&AG's Report, paras 2.14, 2.24; Qq 2–5, 43

to find out what type of skills are now required. There is now consensus in the sector on future skill needs, though progress has been slow due to the large number of organisations which contribute to skills and training in the sector. Delivery of the long-awaited national skills strategy should be CABI Space's most pressing priority.<sup>23</sup>

21. 80% of green space managers believe CABI Space have been successful in raising the profile of green space issues. However, less than half of green space managers had been able to apply their work locally. CABI Space should move towards providing specific targeted advice and support to those local authorities who need it most.<sup>24</sup>

22. The role of green space managers is evolving and although expertise in horticulture is important, a sea-change in the skills profile of the sector will be required. New demands include developing local strategies for their green space network, acting entrepreneurially to generate additional income and resources, liaising with community groups, and to winning new 'customers', especially children, with fun activities.<sup>25</sup>

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23 C&AG's Report, para 2.2; Qq 5, 10, 13, 68, 95

24 C&AG's Report, para 4.24, Fig 12; Q 18

25 C&AG's Report, paras 2.34–2.38; Qq 5, 68, 95

## 3 Better financial management

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23. In 2002 the Urban Green Spaces Taskforce reported that under-investment in green space was a key factor in the decline in the infrastructure and condition of parks and green spaces in many areas. The Government committed to taking further steps to focus more resources to improve the quality of local environments, especially in deprived areas.<sup>26</sup>

24. In 2004–05 nearly £700 million was spent on urban green space. The downward trend in spending has been arrested and local authority real-terms spending on parks is increasing. An increasing proportion of the funds spent on enhancing urban green space are made available directly by central government Departments and through lottery programmes rather than through local authority formula revenue support grant.<sup>27</sup>

25. The C&AG's Report highlighted the high number of central government funding streams in existence. Having a range of potential funding sources each with their own application and validation requirements increases bureaucracy and administrative costs with adverse implications for efficiency. Community groups find it difficult to keep up with the eligibility criteria for so many different short life schemes and the application processes are off-putting. They need quick, inexpensive and non-bureaucratic access to funding and advice. The Department needs to consider rationalising the number of schemes and pooling funding made available to each neighbourhood, perhaps as part of a local area agreement.<sup>28</sup>

26. Too many of the many funding streams available for green space projects are short-term and only pay for major improvements to the physical infrastructure of parks and green spaces. Few funders will pay for the day-to-day upkeep of refurbished green spaces. This is a longstanding problem. New green spaces and major renovation projects need financial security over the medium to long term if we are to avoid the refurbish-decline-refurbish cycle. Balanced against this is the risk that local authorities will not support major projects due to the impact on their maintenance budgets.<sup>29</sup>

27. The Department only awarded Liveability Fund money to local authorities that could demonstrate management capacity and sustainable funding, and this approach should be widely adopted. This programme gave local authorities the opportunity to experiment with the way in which they deliver day-to-day maintenance services. It is therefore disappointing that the early lessons of the programme have yet to be spread more widely.<sup>30</sup>

28. Some local authorities are beginning to use Section 106 ('planning gain') funding to improve and maintain green space. This innovative approach to raising funds from the private sector has the potential to play a much larger role in green space funding, but at present the use of this funding is haphazard. Green space managers and planning officers

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26 C&AG's Report, paras 1.4–18

27 *ibid*, paras 3.4–3.1, Fig 36; Q 13

28 C&AG's Report, para 3.4, Fig 36; Qq 17, 69–70

29 C&AG's Report, para 3.14–3.15, Fig 41; Qq 81–82

30 C&AG's Report, paras 3.16–3.17; Qq 13, 81

need advice and training to make the most of this source of funding. The Department could better identify and share effective practice among local authorities.<sup>31</sup>

29. How green space funding is spent is as important as the amount spent. The C&AG's Report showed that some local authorities spend five times as much as others maintaining their green space. Local authorities must improve their financial management and benchmark performance if they are to better target resources.<sup>32</sup>

30. At present many local authorities do not know how much they spend on grounds maintenance, or whether other authorities are achieving the same or better results for less money. Without this information they cannot drive up value for money. Neither can they adopt a more intelligent procurement strategy for grounds maintenance contracts.<sup>33</sup>

31. Only by being able to make a persuasive business case to the people that matter will green space profile rise up the political, and therefore funding, agenda. The lack of a generally agreed framework for assessing the efficiency and effectiveness of green space management makes it difficult for national and local government to assess appropriate mainstream funding levels and the value for money obtained. The Department agrees that local authorities need a more refined and accurate view of what they spend, generally and on individual spaces. They recognise that the NAO's framework for financial management offers a number of enhancements on existing arrangements. The Department should therefore use every influence to persuade local authorities to adopt it as soon as possible.<sup>34</sup>

32. The C&AG's Report noted that only a few local authorities have adopted innovative approaches to the management of their green space and that modern contracting practices need to be adopted more widely. Local authorities need to strengthen partnership approaches where they contract their maintenance and ensure contracts specify output and outcomes expected, rather than activities to be undertaken. They should consider alternative approaches where appropriate such as giving over the management of their parks to voluntary sector organisations. The Department should identify and spread good practice in this area.<sup>35</sup>

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31 C&AG's Report, paras 3.18–3.20; Qq 77–78

32 C&AG's Report, paras 3.21–3.25, Fig 44; Qq 84, 91

33 C&AG's Report, paras 3.23, 3.26–3.31, Fig 43; Qq 32, 93

34 C&AG's Report, paras 3.22–3.23; Qq 14, 32, 84, 90–91

35 C&AG's Report, paras 3.23, 3.31, Fig 43; Qq 6, 93



# Formal minutes

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**Wednesday 12 July 2006**

Members present:

Mr Edward Leigh, in the Chair

Mr Richard Bacon  
Annette Brooke  
Mr Greg Clark  
Mr Ian Davidson

Helen Goodman  
Sarah McCarthy-Fry  
Mr Austin Mitchell  
Mr Don Touhig

A draft Report (Enhancing urban green space), proposed by the Chairman, brought up and read.

*Ordered*, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 32 read and agreed to.

Summary read and agreed to.

Conclusions and recommendations read and agreed to.

*Resolved*, That the Report be the Fifty-eighth Report of the Committee to the House.

*Ordered*, That the Chairman make the Report to the House.

*Ordered*, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available, in accordance with the provisions of Standing Order No. 134.

[Adjourned until Wednesday 11 October at 3.30 pm.]

## Witnesses

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**Monday 24 April 2006**

*Page*

**Mr Peter Housden** and **Mr Peter Matthew**, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister,  
**Mr Tony Hawkhead**, Groundwork, and **Ms Julia Thrift**, CAFE Space

Ev 1

## List of written evidence

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Department for Communities and Local Government

Ev 16

## List of Reports from the Committee of Public Accounts Session 2005–06

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Second Report	The regeneration of the Millennium Dome and associated land	HC 409 ( <i>Cm 6689</i> )
Third Report	Ministry of Defence: Major Projects Report 2004	HC 410 ( <i>Cm 6712</i> )
Fourth Report	Fraud and error in benefit expenditure	HC 411 ( <i>Cm 6728</i> )
Fifth Report	Inland Revenue: Tax Credits and deleted tax cases	HC 412 ( <i>Cm 6689</i> )
Sixth Report	Department of Trade and Industry: Renewable energy	HC 413 ( <i>Cm 6689</i> )
Seventh Report	The use of operating theatres in the Northern Ireland Health and Personal Social Services	HC 414 ( <i>Cm 6699</i> )
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Ninth Report	Foot and Mouth Disease: applying the lessons	HC 563 ( <i>Cm 6728</i> )
Tenth Report	Jobskills	HC 564 ( <i>Cm 6724</i> )
Eleventh Report	Local Management of Schools	HC 565 ( <i>Cm 6724</i> )
Twelfth Report	Helping those in financial hardship: the running of the Social Fund	HC 601 ( <i>Cm 6728</i> )
Thirteenth Report	The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister: Tackling homelessness	HC 653 ( <i>Cm 6743</i> )
Fourteenth Report	Energywatch and Postwatch	HC 654 ( <i>Cm 6743</i> )
Fifteenth Report	HM Customs and Excise Standard Report 2003–04	HC 695 ( <i>Cm 6743</i> )
Sixteenth Report	Home Office: Reducing vehicle crime	HC 696 ( <i>Cm 6743</i> )
Seventeenth Report	Achieving value for money in the delivery of public services	HC 742 ( <i>Cm 6743</i> )
First Special Report	The BBC's investment in Freeview: The response of the BBC Governors to the Committee's Third Report of Session 2004–05	HC 750 ( <i>N/A</i> )
Eighteenth Report	Department for Education and Skills: Improving school attendance in England	HC 789 ( <i>Cm 6766</i> )
Nineteenth Report	Department of Health: Tackling cancer: improving the patient journey	HC 790 ( <i>Cm 6766</i> )
Twentieth Report	The NHS Cancer Plan: a progress report	HC 791 ( <i>Cm 6766</i> )
Twenty-first Report	Skills for Life: Improving adult literacy and numeracy	HC 792 ( <i>Cm 6766</i> )
Twenty-second Report	Maintaining and improving Britain's railway stations	HC 535 ( <i>Cm 6775</i> )
Twenty-third Report	Filing of income tax self assessment returns	HC 681 ( <i>Cm 6775</i> )
Twenty-fourth Report	The BBC's White City 2 development	HC 652
Twenty-fifth Report	Securing strategic leadership in the learning and skills sector	HC 602 ( <i>Cm 6775</i> )
Twenty-sixth Report	Assessing and reporting military readiness	HC 667 ( <i>Cm 6775</i> )
Twenty-seventh Report	Lost in translation? Responding to the challenges of European law	HC 590 ( <i>Cm 6775</i> )
Twenty-eighth Report	Extending access to learning through technology: Ufi and the learndirect service	HC 706 ( <i>Cm 6775</i> )
Twenty-ninth Report	Excess Votes 2004–05	HC 916 ( <i>N/A</i> )

Thirtieth Report	Excess Votes (Northern Ireland) 2004–05	HC 917 (N/A)
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Thirty-third Report	The Royal Parks and the Diana, Princess of Wales Memorial Fountain	HC 644 (Cm 6789)
Thirty-fourth Report	Returning failed asylum applicants	HC 620 (Cm 6863)
Thirty-fifth Report	The refinancing of the Norfolk and Norwich PFI Hospital	HC 694
Thirty-sixth Report	Tackling the complexity of the benefits system	HC 765 (Cm 6863)
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Fifty-eighth Report	Enhancing urban green space	HC 1073

The reference number of the Treasury Minute to each Report is printed in brackets after the HC printing number

# Oral evidence

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## Taken before the Committee of Public Accounts

on Monday 24 April 2006

Members present:

Mr Edward Leigh, in the Chair

Greg Clark  
Mr David Curry  
Helen Goodman

Mr Sadiq Khan  
Mr Austin Mitchell  
Kitty Ussher

**Sir John Bourn KCB**, Comptroller and Auditor General, National Audit Office, was in attendance and gave oral evidence.

**Mr Marius Gallaher**, Alternate Treasury Officer of Accounts, HM Treasury, was in attendance.

### REPORT BY THE COMPTROLLER AND AUDITOR GENERAL

#### OFFICE OF THE DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER

#### ENHANCING URBAN GREEN SPACE (HC 935)

*Witnesses:* **Mr Peter Housden**, Permanent Secretary and **Mr Peter Matthew**, Head of the Community Renewal and Liveability Division, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, **Mr Tony Hawkhead**, Chief Executive, Groundwork and **Ms Julia Thrift**, Director, CABA Space, gave evidence.

**Q1 Chairman:** Good afternoon and welcome to the Committee of Public Accounts where today we are looking at the Comptroller and Auditor General's Report *Enhancing Urban Green Space*. We have witnesses from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, Mr Peter Housden, who is the Permanent Secretary. It is your first visit to us, is it not?

**Mr Housden:** It is.

**Q2 Chairman:** You are very welcome. Mr Peter Matthew is the Head of Community Renewal and Liveability Division. From Groundwork, we have Mr Tony Hawkhead, who is the Chief Executive, and from the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment we have Ms Julia Thrift who is the Director of CABA Space. Shall we start now by looking at some overall findings? If you look at paragraph 11 on page six you will see that one in six urban local authorities' green space apparently is still in decline. Are you targeting resources where they are most needed?

**Mr Housden:** First of all, let me say thank you for this opportunity this afternoon. The answer to your question is: to a good extent yes, but we do feel there is further to go in terms of targeting poor performing local authorities and those spaces in better performing local authorities that may not have been improved so far.

**Q3 Chairman:** That is a very short answer. You are obviously well trained for this Committee; we are very grateful for that. We need to pursue this a bit further though. In order to try to find out what is happening, shall we look at the table 20 on page 31 please? It relates also to paragraph 2.14 which tells us "There is a risk that the resident satisfaction national PSA indicator may be met through further

improvement in those areas in which residents are already relatively satisfied with the quality of their green and open space" such as Worthing and Oxford whilst satisfaction levels stay the same or decline in the areas where satisfaction is relatively low such as Bristol and Bradford. What concerns me is that you are meeting your targets, but there are still some areas which are declining and your targets are not adequately reflecting this.

**Mr Housden:** We would agree with your sense of the direction that the policy needs to move on. Our sense here is that the first phase of the work, as the Report fairly pays tribute to, has brought some important successes. There are hundreds and thousands of improved public spaces in England. User satisfaction is going up; unevenly, as you described, but overall it is going up. Your Report also describes the greater confidence there is amongst managers of green space that things are improving and can get better. Our sense is that the capacity for further improvement is being built.

**Q4 Chairman:** That is a very reassuring reply but it completely ignores the question I asked you.

**Mr Housden:** I was just coming on to the specifics. There are five things, quickly if I may, which are the key for us to getting more even improvement. The first of them is about getting greater integration of the green spaces agenda at both national and local level with the other things that really matter to people so the whole community safety, the whole street scene, cleanliness, crime and disorder; all of those things do not appear to citizens as chopped up bits of policy but they are how their community is. Getting local authorities and indeed central government to look at those things in the round has been an important aspect

of progress which it is important to further. The second point is about targeting poor performers and particularly using the better data that we have available now, to which your own Report makes an important contribution, to really identify those places which do need to raise their game.

**Q5 Chairman:** What will you do about it?

**Mr Housden:** We have the capacity to do two things really. First of all it is actually about spreading best practice. We have a number of devices—and we have CABE Space and Groundwork here with us today who have been very important partners—to actually engage with local authorities who need help to provide advisers on the ground who can help them in developing and implementing a strategy. The skills agenda is also particularly important and the Report draws attention to that here. These are long-running issues to produce a sea change in the level of skills and we might talk a bit more about that later on, but there is important work there.

**Q6 Chairman:** What I have to put to you is that if you look at page 57 of this Report, and you talked about spreading good practice just now, there are two case studies, one relating to Lewisham and the other to King Edward Memorial Park. Here you have good practice. Do you agree that perhaps you have not done enough in the past to spread good practice where it exists?

**Mr Housden:** In the first phase of arresting the decline that the Report speaks of we have done some very important things on spreading good practice, but I should not want to say to the Committee today that we feel we have gone the whole way here. Your earlier questions drew proper attention to the fact that there have been uneven rates of improvement. We have now a variety of partners; I have mentioned CABE Space and Groundwork and there are others. We have important website resources, our “how to” programme is offering local authorities training and advice, best practice guidance. Through all of those mechanisms, we are encouraging local authorities to take advantage of it and again we might come on to this later on. We also have some funding mechanisms and processes which actually produce some incentives for—

**Q7 Chairman:** Okay, we can come back to that in a moment. Let us just look at sustaining improvement. If you look at page 53, it says in paragraph 3.21 “Current performance reporting and assessment regimes provide limited assurance on the economy and efficiency of local authority green space expenditure”. If you look over the page you will see “Of the 23 indicators used to assess the performance of local authority environmental, protective and cultural services . . . There are no indicators that measure economy by relating resources to activity”. It seems that some of your measures are not very effective. Is that a fair criticism?

**Mr Housden:** Probably not.

**Q8 Chairman:** It is not a fair criticism?

**Mr Housden:** No, it is not a fair criticism. There are 90 best value performance indicators in total which contribute to the comprehensive performance assessment of local authorities. I think in relation to green space that we have the right one, that it is about user satisfaction, how people perceive that. Our sense going forward is that the wider programme of data that we have available and our capacity to target improvement into particular communities, to engage those communities with the improvement of their green spaces, will actually make sure that people at local level do have a good measure of how effective their local green spaces provision is and the further extension of the green flag programme will both provide incentives for local councils to improve their overall offer as well as their best parks and also enable local citizens to see how their local authority is performing. The best value performance indicator framework is not necessarily the one that citizens use to reach a judgment.

**Q9 Chairman:** No, I am sure it is not. Let us look at sustainability again. Perhaps you can help me Mr Hawkhead. If you look at paragraph 3.14 on page 48 you will see “We found that most of the direct funding schemes provided capital monies to purchase . . . Very few provided revenue for ongoing maintenance”. What I am worried about is that we are providing all this money, the park bench is provided, or whatever, and there are no revenue monies to keep it going.

**Mr Hawkhead:** That is a fair point. In my entire lifetime of working in the regeneration sector, which dates back to the late 1980s, it has always been easier and more straightforward to get money for capital programmes than it has for sustaining running cost programmes. That said, there has been a significant improvement in the past few years in, first of all, recognising that a problem exists. For a long time people believed that throwing money at capital projects was the only answer. We are working with CABE, and I am sure Julia will want to comment because they are leading, on looking at different models that can be used to allow for longer-term maintenance. Of course I would say this as Groundwork’s Chief Executive, but one of the most important ways of ensuring longer-term sustainability is by really properly involving the community from the start. That is not some sort of perpetual motion machine which allows you to do it without investing money, but it can make a huge difference to the cost of such schemes and to the ownership of them by local people, which reduces vandalism and other cost arisings.

**Q10 Chairman:** Ms Thrift, may I refer you to the skills shortage now? It is mentioned in paragraphs 2.34 to 2.38. Why has so little progress been made in addressing the skills shortage, do you think?

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**Ms Thrift:** There are several reasons for this. One of them is that, although the Urban Green Spaces Taskforce identified that there was a skills problem, it was not entirely clear exactly what the problem was. So the first thing that CABE Space did in terms of its work on skills was to commission some research which was a very thorough investigation into what sort of skills are needed to provide the parks for today and tomorrow. Whereas many people in the sector felt that the real problem was a shortage of people with horticultural skills, what the research revealed was that actually nowadays to run a park you need all sorts of different skills. You need to be able to liaise with community groups, you need to be able to raise money from different sources, you need good general management and strategic skills and it took us some time to work with a number of partners in the sector to convince them that horticultural skills were very important, but they were not the only skills that were necessary, and that in fact having really good general management skills and community and liaison skills was equally important. We have now achieved that. There is now recognition that those skills are vital and we have been talking to about ten of the leading organisations which might help deliver skills about how we can take this forward. Another issue is that there are so many different organisations which contribute to training and skilling people for this sector. You are talking about park managers, ecologists, leisure managers, people from lots of different backgrounds, so a number of different educational organisations, sector skills councils and so on all need to be brought into alignment to make things happen.

**Q11 Chairman:** May I just turn to you finally Mr Matthew, to give you a chance to answer a question? What worries me about all this is that this is a traditional local government authority. Here we have central government stepping in, it has very little means of actually enforcing its will or knowing enough about what is going on, there may be confused direction and the only result may be that local government, which perhaps was not doing very much in the past in certain areas, now feels the responsibility is taken away from it and they do even less. Do you think that is a fair overall criticism?

**Mr Matthew:** No, that is not a fair criticism.

**Q12 Chairman:** Tell us why you do not think it is a fair criticism.

**Mr Matthew:** It is not a fair criticism because I do not think that central government is imposing itself on local government and that was the consensus which actually came out through the work of the taskforce and the previous select committee. What we are saying is that actually we are enabling local authorities and local partners by supporting them and encouraging improvements. That is very different. What we are saying is actually we want local authorities to adopt good practice and we can help in terms of providing a national good practice framework, that was one of the deficiencies which were identified before and we can help, for example,

by actually improving the national database, information base; that was a deficiency before. We can help local authorities by spreading good practice. Our role is about enabling the local authorities rather than imposing our views on them.

**Q13 Mr Mitchell:** The basic problem surely is that local authorities have been strapped for cash for so long and this has been very low down in their priorities. That is really the basic problem, is it not?

**Mr Housden:** The report draws attention to the changing pattern of spend: first of all the decline, that then being arrested and in real terms the spending on parks increasing. However, you are absolutely right that there are many other pressures on local authorities so it is encouraging that in real terms that increase has been brought to bear. An important part of the Report's power here is that it is saying it is not so much just the quantity of money that is spent in a local authority, it is how it is spent. This goes back to Julia's points about the way in which services are procured, the way in which additional funding is sought, and our Liveability programme, which was referred to in the Report as one of our key responses in the initial phase of work, actually got this the right way round. It made capital available to local authorities to improve green spaces but first they had to demonstrate that they had the management capacity and quality to make it count and they had a sustainable funding plan; having improved the space, having made the investment, the community would continue to see benefits. There is a chart in the report that shows the way in which not just central government but also lottery funders and other agencies outside ODPM have similarly had those sorts of criteria in their scheme. You are right to say that local authorities are under pressure; they always will be, they will have lots of competing resources. Spending in real terms has improved and some of the work that we have been doing in encouraging this helped communities to get better value from that money.

**Q14 Mr Mitchell:** What I meant was that the financial problem still goes on. I am delighted to see the initiatives that have been taken and that is very encouraging and certainly in one park, the People's Park in Grimsby, it has produced improvements, but unless the local authority allocates staff . . . It is a question of maintaining the improvement, is it not? It is a question of maintenance and a question of park staffing on a continuous basis, rather than an initiative, a splash of money and then things decline again because there is no continuous supervision.

**Mr Housden:** Exactly, you have that completely right. This is about skills at every level. It is also about, and the Report gets this right, the local authority having a proper strategy for all its green spaces, knowing what it actually spends on them. No doubt we shall talk about this later, but there are some proposals in the report to get a more refined and accurate view on what local authorities are actually spending on particular spaces. All of those

things help to bring those sustainability issues to the fore. You must be right that this will be a continuing issue for local authorities going forward.

**Q15 Mr Mitchell:** I am not sure about the part of the Report which is dealing with deprived communities, page nine “Work needs to be done to ensure that urban communities which have endured poor quality green space for many years, do not miss out on improvements. We found that this group contained many deprived communities in receipt of Neighbourhood Renewal Funds for use on green space”. Does that mean that more money is being channelled into the deprived areas than into the middle class areas?

**Mr Housden:** Yes, and this is true in general terms in local authority funding. The rate support grant gives an element for green spaces under the Environmental, Protective and Cultural Services element. That is a formula based on need, so that picks up relative deprivation. There are two or three further programmes which we could talk about, the neighbourhood renewal fund, the new deals for communities and the safer stronger communities’ fund. All of those target resources to areas of greatest need and, to pick up on the Chairman’s question earlier, they do so in a way that requires the local authority to commit to specific improvements, so it is something for something. I could talk through those schemes, if it would help, but basically yes, the money is targeted at disadvantaged areas and it is focused on committed improvements.

**Q16 Mr Mitchell:** Do we have statistics on whether parks in the more deprived areas go downhill more quickly?<sup>1</sup> Certainly in a Grimsby context the poorer the area the more rapid the decline, the more complaints I get about vandalism, the more complaints I get about homosexuals hanging around, the more complaints I get about kids on bikes. That is where the complaints come and visibly, when I go to look, the decline does seem to be more rapid. Despite an improvement, the potential dangers in those poorer areas, because there is less social discipline round about and because there is less of a middle class community saying do not do that laddie and whatever, are much greater. Do you have figures proving that or not?

<sup>1</sup> *Note by witness:* No, we do not have data that shows the rate of decline of condition of green spaces in deprived areas or other areas. However, we do know from the Urban Green Space Taskforce (2002) and Public Parks Assessment 2001 that parks in deprived areas were more likely to be of poor quality and have often had further to improve.

More recent CABE Space research, ‘Decent parks, Decent Behaviour’ (2005) also found that people felt that poor quality public space contributes to the onset of vandalism and anti-social behaviour—and an on-going cycle of decline.

That is why the Department’s Public Service Agreement 8 sets targets for improvements to green spaces across the country overall by 2008 but also specifically in deprived areas to help ensure that no one is disadvantaged by where they live. However, as recognised by the NAO report, some areas currently receiving NRF were already achieving high quality green space.

**Mr Housden:** Not immediately to hand. The general intelligence is exactly on the point that you make, that the need element in the rate support grant reflects just that fact, that those communities under pressure will have greater attrition and greater need. The other thing that I draw from your question is the importance of seeing green spaces as part of the total strategy that a local authority has for its given area. So crime and disorder, all of those sorts of issues that you mentioned, are the context in which this needs to be seen by a local authority. One aspect of best practice that we are seeking to spread is to see parks departments and green spaces up their priority agenda and be seen as a really key issue by the local authority in the round, by their local strategic partnership and so on and so forth. You are right that the challenge that disadvantaged areas have in maintaining green spaces to a high quality is greater than in other areas.

**Q17 Mr Mitchell:** Would it not be better or right if we had a single and more consistent strategy? I see a lot of local authorities have not submitted improvement plans and a substantial proportion are still dragging their feet. Would it not be better if you had a one-grant system, if you had the ability to lay down basic requirements in terms of spending in local authorities on green space, if the situation were not so confusing? There is a number of sources of grants and a lot of people spend time chasing round trying to get them, getting them is haphazard, so that improvement is unevenly distributed. Would it not be better if you had just one strategy and a consistent strategy and laid down basic requirements on the local authorities?

**Mr Housden:** We are here about the overall strategy that Government have in defining their relationship with local government. The trend in recent years has been to move away from specific funding, sometimes in relatively small amounts, for particular issues at local authority level. Particularly because of the circumstances you describe, it becomes confusing and difficult to chase lots of different funding streams, so there has been some consolidation. It is also true that if you see green spaces in that wider context as you were putting it, the local authority needs to be able to have flexibility to invest funds in the places and in the ways that it sees appropriate. So the move towards local area agreements is very important here because what that has done has taken a substantial block of central government money, not by any means simply from ODPM but £800 million across government, and delivered that to local authorities on a pooled basis. It is targeted according to need and having received the grant the local authority can actually spend it according to need. So the trend is towards allowing more flexibility at local level. The imperative from our point of view therefore is to maintain a coherent national strategy and by emphasising integration, best practice, skills, data, that is the way we can actually handle the different circumstances of over 400 local authorities powerfully. The fifth element is really critical, that it has the capacity to intervene in poor performing cases and it is not a free good, it is



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not “Do what you like”. We have the capacity to know who is performing poorly and to offer the right sort of encouragement and challenge to help them to move forward.

**Q18 Mr Mitchell:** But at the end of the day, in spite of all the good will—and I accept that you have to begin working in that kind of fashion—one in six still reports continuing decline in the quality of the green space and there are some areas that have a consistently poor record. What are you going to do about them as we move on to the next stage, because unless you bring some kind of pressure on them, have some kind of discipline, that failure rate is going to go on?

**Mr Housden:** We are talking about progress but, you are quite right, we should not be complacent. We know who these people are through the range of data that is now available to us and CABE Space, Julia’s people, are working with over 70 local authorities to help them develop the right sort of strategy to move them forward. Some of them, for example, may simply be trying to maintain too many green spaces. They may not properly have done an audit of how many they have and it may be better for them actually to rationalise, to realise some capital from sales of green spaces which can be better devoted to other uses. All those sorts of things are the way in which, by engaging specialist support with local authorities, we can enable them to move forward.

**Q19 Mr Khan:** The report from the NAO discusses how there have been 30 years of decline in the quality of our urban green space and in the background on page three reasons are given for the decline in paragraph three. Do I take from what you have been saying and the work that CABE are doing that it is inevitable that there needs to be some central involvement, if we are not to allow the urban green spaces to flounder even more?

**Mr Housden:** Yes is the answer to that. What we have been discussing here is the style and the manner of the national engagement.

**Q20 Mr Khan:** Mr Matthew would call it enabling the local authority, local community to get involved.

**Mr Housden:** These are not pretty words, are they? What we have been trying to describe here is an approach which avoids micro managing.

**Q21 Mr Khan:** The Report uses words such as central advocacy, help raising awareness. That is fine, is it not? Are you comfortable with that?

**Mr Housden:** Yes, that is fine.

**Q22 Mr Khan:** May I take you to page 21 of the report which talks about some of the reasons. A lot of them are common sense and frankly we did not need a report to tell us this: the benefits of green space, social cohesion, pollution control, health and well-being. We would agree with most of those reasons. May I now take you to page 29, in particular paragraph 2.13? What this quite clearly

says in paragraph 2.13 is “Residents in deprived communities have not shared equally in the improvement seen” and it talks about how it reaches that conclusion. Is it not a scandal that those most in need of decent green spaces in urban areas are being deprived of that?

**Mr Housden:** The Report properly points out, as your first question underlined, the huge benefits there are to a community of having good quality green spaces.

**Q23 Mr Khan:** Is it not a scandal that they are not benefiting?

**Mr Housden:** The judgment I would come to on this is that there are real outstanding needs which need to be tackled. However, if you were looking overall, you would see important progress here.

**Q24 Mr Khan:** Progress has been made, but is it not a scandal that they are seeing the least progress?

**Mr Housden:** I would not come to that word, no.

**Q25 Mr Khan:** Why are your initiatives failing these people?

**Mr Housden:** The evidence is that the initiatives are not failing these people, that there is important progress across the board. What paragraph 2.13 is pointing to is that that is more rapid in the more advantaged areas.

**Q26 Mr Khan:** Go to page 32, table 21, “Residents’ satisfaction with parks and open spaces in 2000 and 2003”. Do you accept those?

**Mr Housden:** Of course.

**Q27 Mr Khan:** They are doing the least best.

**Mr Housden:** There is a difference; I am not disputing that for a second. Nor am I disputing the way in which our policy going forward needs to address those issues, both in terms of the quantity of funding, which it does, and enabling those local authorities to have the skilled support to enable them to increase those rates of satisfaction.

**Q28 Mr Khan:** So why are you failing them then?

**Mr Housden:** We have discussed the greater challenge that those local authorities face in maintaining green spaces. We can predict therefore that the decline would have been more pronounced in those areas.

**Q29 Mr Khan:** One of the reasons I was quite interested in which you gave in response to Mr Mitchell’s question was that one has to question whether, when we look at open spaces, green spaces, having too much may be a problem and greater attention should be given to maintaining a small number. Am I paraphrasing that accurately?

**Mr Housden:** Yes, that can be a response.

**Q30 Mr Khan:** Have you undertaken an exercise to map the green spaces in the deprived areas?

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**Mr Housden:** We are just undertaking now, in relation to this data point, an exercise to map green spaces, yes, with Ordnance Survey. Local authorities are loading this data onto a national mapping base which will be a very powerful tool.

**Q31 Mr Khan:** Bearing in mind that the implication of what you are saying is that it may be in the interests of some areas to have fewer open spaces so they can better maintain those that they have, how many of those green spaces are protected, for example metropolitan open land that cannot be built upon or sold off?

**Mr Housden:** The planning framework of course applies protection to all green spaces. PPG17, to which the Report refers, actually places local authorities under an obligation to conduct an audit and to assess their need and we shall no doubt talk later about the progress that local authorities have made in achieving that. Right from the very first day that it came into force, that guidance actually required local authorities to pay attention to its requirements. It is a broad and balanced policy that local authorities—

**Q32 Mr Khan:** Time is short. I am confused. What do you mean when you say maybe some local authorities should do more with fewer sites, rather than doing a little with more sites?

**Mr Housden:** My preface to the point was to say that in some cases local authorities may not have an accurate record of all the green spaces that they are responsible for and funding. They may not know, as the Report indicates, exactly what they spend on maintaining them and one aspect, and I would stress one aspect, ought to be to acquire that data and understanding and see what, from their point of view, is a sustainable way forward.

**Q33 Mr Khan:** Such as?

**Mr Housden:** It may well be, for example, that a community would be better served by having four excellent parks than five or six which are less well maintained.

**Q34 Mr Khan:** What happens to the fifth and sixth one?

**Mr Housden:** That would be a matter for the local authority to determine.

**Q35 Mr Khan:** Come on, look, we are all reasonably intelligent here—some less so than others. What do you mean by that?

**Mr Housden:** The local authority, thinking about the totality of space it is responsible for, would have to reach a judgment about the viability of the spaces it was maintaining, what alternative uses they might be put to.

**Q36 Mr Khan:** May I tell you why I asked the question? Four questions ago, I asked you a question about mapping, because my concern was that four questions on you would say what you are saying. The question I asked four questions ago was: how much of this green space is protected and

therefore cannot be built upon, for example, housing? You know the stories about playing fields being sold off for luxury developments which local people cannot use because they are luxury developments. I am confused. I am sure you are not going to suggest luxury development housing, because you are far too intelligent and as this is your first select committee it would be suicide career-wise I am sure. What sort of other things could they do besides luxury developments, which have been my experience in Wandsworth?

**Mr Housden:** To link this to the wider debate, one of the things which are important in sustaining green spaces is actually to generate revenue and an authority that had a plentiful supply of green space but was worried about its quality might think about the way in which additional facilities within green spaces might realise revenue. Those facilities of course would need to be built on something.

**Q37 Mr Khan:** Do you mean an indoor tennis court which only some people can afford because of the fees?

**Mr Housden:** It would be for the local authority to assess its community need and to engage people.

**Q38 Mr Khan:** In light of what you have said, is it not staggering, if not quite a scandal, that only 53%<sup>2</sup> of urban local authorities have a written strategy for green space and if you go to figure 56 and paragraph 4.16, it shows even more shortcomings with regard to local authorities failing to have any strategy for their green spaces. In light of their failure to have a strategy, in light of the fact that ODPM seems to do nothing about it, is it not surprising that some local authorities are selling off their green spaces for luxury developments?

**Mr Housden:** It is certainly right that our view is that local authorities benefit hugely by having a well-developed and evidence-based strategy which offers sustainable green spaces going forward.

**Q39 Mr Khan:** A significant number do not and I am interested in them.

**Mr Housden:** Indeed. Our strategy about targeting poor performers and providing the right balance of incentives and challenge will encourage more authorities to have a good urban green space.

**Q40 Mr Khan:** Will there be a stick or will it simply be a carrot?

**Mr Housden:** There is no statutory requirement to have an urban green space.

**Q41 Mr Khan:** Are you lobbying for there to be a statutory requirement?

**Mr Housden:** Ministers have taken the view thus far that this is not an area for a statutory requirement, but there is a range of incentives and support and challenge available to encourage local authorities towards that. If the progress that is reported in this phase of the work were not

<sup>2</sup> In 2000, 53% of local authorities had a written strategy. In 2005 this figure was 69%.

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sustained or to be reversed, no doubt ministers would need to consider a range of alternatives. There is evidence of good progress and a solid direction of travel.

**Q42 Chairman:** Before we move on I must press you further on this line of questioning which has been pursued very effectively by Mr Khan and Mr Mitchell. Mr Housden has had his chance. Shall we try to give Mr Matthew his chance now to answer this vital question they have tried to put to you, because is it key? You told me Mr Matthew that—I think your words were—central government interventions have “enabled” local government to do better. Is that a fair paraphrase of what you told me?

**Mr Matthew:** Yes.

**Q43 Chairman:** If, however, you look at paragraph 2.13 on page 29—this is a point that Mr Khan was making and Mr Mitchell was making—it shows that satisfaction is greatest in authorities which are already doing well “This improvement in resident satisfaction is not evenly spread. Residents in deprived communities have not shared equally in the improvement seen”. So my question to you Mr Matthew, and you can try to step in where your permanent secretary apparently has failed to answer this question, is: has the attempt to run green spaces actually achieved much for deprived communities or not? Is this words all words and not enough action?

**Mr Matthew:** Part of my answer is actually that the starting point of the deprived communities is much, much lower. The evidence was very clear that actually the deprived areas suffered enormously from a low quality public environment and parks and public spaces, so in a sense they started from a lower base. I can accept the evidence of the NAO Report that actually finds that the pace of increase and the pace of improvement in the deprived areas are not as rapid as elsewhere. The point I have to accept from that is actually that improvements are happening in the deprived areas. The question for us now is actually to see how we might accelerate those improvements.

**Q44 Greg Clark:** Mr Housden, the NAO makes clear that 80% of the population live in urban environments so green space is very important to them. May I ask you just to reflect on the environmental importance of green space in terms of air quality for example? What do you know of the contribution that urban green space makes to air quality?

**Mr Housden:** Well, our sense across the whole of the environmental agenda is that it makes a very significant contribution, not just in terms of pollutants and the way in which trees and so forth can absorb pollutants, but also on questions of water, flood control, controlling of run-off, all those sorts of issues that development can raise for us. In terms of the whole climate change agenda, we think that urban green space really makes a significant contribution. My guess is that one of the

reasons why local authorities have given this more importance and why national government have given it importance, why you have done a study of it, is because of that contribution.

**Q45 Greg Clark:** Can you just say a bit more about the water run-off point, just to amplify what you said on that?

**Mr Housden:** I am no expert in this area but the advice I have, and it is fairly common sense, is that if you actually have a very high proportion of an urban area that is hard surfaced, particularly through tarmacs or buildings and so forth, you will get very rapid water evaporation and run-off. The more water retention capacity you have through grass, trees, other vegetation, the less likely that is to be the case. Of course, in terms of flood control near rivers, playing fields, big green spaces and so forth they offer a very natural way of actually responding to those issues without requiring significant engineering works to divert rivers or whatever it might be.

**Q46 Greg Clark:** Would you say that with the water shortages we are suffering at the moment avoiding the run-off that would come from developing land like this is of particular importance?

**Mr Housden:** Yes, I would.

**Q47 Greg Clark:** Can you say a bit about wildlife and biodiversity? Have you made any conclusions as to the contribution of urban green space as a haven for wildlife?

**Mr Housden:** It is a very significant positive benefit there and a number of the important developments that community groups have pursued in the last few years have been to create more bio-diverse habitats, nature reserves of different types. There is an example in the report from Middlesbrough, where they have actually taken what is a very imaginative step. They have set themselves a target about how near a nature reserve should be to every community that they serve. That is a good example of not only being environmentally responsive but also making a public good out of that type of access.

**Q48 Greg Clark:** That is very helpful. To lose this green space, for all the reasons you say, would be a tragedy. Do you have any figures on what the area of urban green space has been in the past and is now? In other words, are we expanding the area or is it contracting year by year?

**Mr Housden:** I am afraid I do not have the figure with me today. I am not sure whether we hold that. If we do, we shall certainly let you have a note on it.<sup>3</sup>

**Q49 Greg Clark:** It seems surprising. If it is a subject of sufficient importance to have an NAO investigation, and you clearly attach great importance to it, you would think that the

<sup>3</sup> Ev 16–17

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department would have a view as to whether we have more or less urban green space. Do you not have a feeling as to whether it is expanding or contracting?

**Mr Housden:** I do not have it here. One of the key things about the mapping aspect of all this, of having local authorities make their returns, is that since 2001 we have been progressively surveying local authority green space, playing fields, cemeteries and so on and so forth. As I indicated earlier, we are at the stage now of starting to load that with Ordnance Survey onto a computer.

**Q50 Greg Clark:** Clearly it is going to be a comprehensive map, but at the same time you can take a sample approach to see whether the trends are for more or less urban green space, can you not? Have you not done any sampling?

**Mr Housden:** No, I am advised that we have not done.

**Q51 Greg Clark:** Would you write to the Committee with your estimates of the green space that exists and whether the trend is for less or more?

**Mr Housden:** I shall certainly do that.

**Q52 Greg Clark:** Are there any specific planning restrictions on the development of urban green space?

**Mr Housden:** Yes indeed.

**Q53 Greg Clark:** Can you describe them?

**Mr Housden:** Planning policy guidance note 17 sets them out and all planning authorities have been required to have regard to that since 2002. The planning note describes the circumstance of the importance of a variety of green spaces and restricts the capacity of the planning authority, or sets criteria which it should use in assessing proposals for development. It also asks the local authority to conduct an audit of the facilities and green spaces in their area and to assess their needs.

**Q54 Greg Clark:** It was the protection that I was interested in and I am grateful for that. So actually there is special protection; they are not considered to be brownfield sites, for example.

**Mr Housden:** No.

**Q55 Greg Clark:** The environmental advantages that you describe in terms of the contribution to air quality, to wildlife, to water husbandry, those advantages also attach to people's back gardens in the same way, do they not?

**Mr Housden:** Yes, they do.

**Q56 Greg Clark:** Do back gardens enjoy any of the protections that you just mentioned for public green space?

**Mr Housden:** They are not regarded as public green space.

**Q57 Greg Clark:** Are there any planning restrictions that prevent the development in the same way that would apply to public green space?

**Mr Housden:** I understand that the conversion of one dwelling into several would be regarded as development and require planning permission, so yes, there are constraints that would apply if people were to seek to reduce the amount of green space to increase the amount of development on a given plot. There would be a *de minimis* here.

**Q58 Greg Clark:** In fact is it not the case that the development of a back garden is captured in the definition of brownfield sites? It is considered to be previously developed land, just the same as the house that the garden is attached to. So far from it having protection, as you know from your work in the department, a brownfield site is subject to specific targeting for house building and when that refers to industrial land, that is quite right, that is very important. However, for the reasons that you have given, gardens are rather different from former industrial land in that sense, are they not? Do you not think this is an anomaly that they should be considered to be brownfield sites when you were emphatic that urban green space certainly could not be considered in that way?

**Mr Housden:** Within the purview of this Report they are certainly not public green space.

**Q59 Greg Clark:** No, it is clear they are not public green space, but you said in an earlier answer that the environmental advantages they offer are shared and you emphasised the importance of them. There is no difference whether you have trees and grass in a public park or in a row of back gardens. Is it not odd that you have protection for one and an absence of protection, indeed incentives to develop in the other?

**Mr Housden:** I would not go so far as to say that there is no protection for the circumstances you describe, but they are not public green spaces and there are circumstances in which the use of gardens for development is captured by the planning system in the way that I described.

**Q60 Greg Clark:** Do you know how much green space has been lost in private gardens in the last year?

**Mr Housden:** I do not have a figure for that, I am sorry.

**Q61 Greg Clark:** Do you know whether you collect figures on it?

**Mr Housden:** I do not, but I am happy to have a look at that and to let you know.<sup>4</sup>

**Q62 Greg Clark:** I am interested in both. You are going to write to me with figures for the loss of park land and it would be interesting to know what area each year is being lost from gardens. We know across the country, and this affects all areas, that actually even planning officers in councils do not regard themselves as having sufficient powers to protect gardens. They feel that they are, through case law, expected to approve planning

<sup>4</sup> Ev 16

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applications that involve the development of residential gardens, which means that, for reasons that you say, it is unlikely that we would lose vast amounts of green space in the public domain, yet I suspect, and indeed I have some evidence, that we are losing far more environmentally important green space which happens to be behind houses rather than in public parks. Would you be able to write and just update us on what figures are available?

**Mr Housden:** Certainly.

**Q63 Greg Clark:** Would you agree that actually, if you find that it is the case that back gardens are considered to be brownfield sites, that seems to be an anomalous definition?

**Mr Housden:** Always in planning matters you seek to strike a balance between the type of developments that are likely to have a significant impact on the community and those that are not. The judgment about what householders should be able to do within the curtilage of their own property would be the subject of different views. You accurately described, to my knowledge, the current state of affairs.

**Q64 Helen Goodman:** Obviously one of the groups for whom the quality of urban green spaces is most important is our children.

**Mr Housden:** Yes.

**Q65 Helen Goodman:** I wonder whether you are aware of the fact that in 1970 the average eight-year-old was allowed by his or her parents to go 800 yards from home, whereas today it is only 100 yards. I have here the results of a survey which was done on children's attitudes to public spaces and their enjoyment of playing in public spaces and I am going to ask you whether you think these things might be connected: fears for their safety and of bullying, traffic, dirty, boring, run-down, lack of choice, lack of access and, for children with disabilities, inaccessible and poor transport. Does that sound familiar?

**Mr Housden:** Yes.

**Q66 Helen Goodman:** Turning to page 66, in figure 58 there is an analysis, which was done by Sheffield University, of the strategies that local authorities have made. You can see in this that 66% of the strategies made no provision for children and teenagers, 83% have no links with early years' strategy and 44% have no links with their play strategy. What are you going to do about that?

**Mr Housden:** First of all agree with you that those are very striking figures and that they reflect real needs and real issues. They go to the question about how local authorities view, manage and develop their green spaces. If they had a children's eyes-on to do that, they would do all of the things that so many authorities have been recorded as not doing here. We were in Mile End Park the week before last where huge efforts have been made to make an urban green space responsive to children, both those who are able to play independently,

those who are interested in adventure games, right down to small children who will be having supervised play in a nursery sort of environment, lots of care about safety, a very strong ethos about diversity and paying people respect. This can be got right in spectacular fashion, but the reason it is probably not, I would venture, is because parks are seen in too many authorities as a narrow issue about mowing grass and keeping dogs in the right places and not about providing for all of their needs. My last point would be that if under planning policy guidance note 17 you undertook an assessment of need, you would properly get to the issues about children and how you might plan for them going forward.

**Q67 Helen Goodman:** I shall come back to PPG17 in a minute. First I want to ask Ms Thrift about figure 12 on page 23. It says that one of the key things is that we need to achieve "... a better understanding of how we measure and evaluate risk in designing our spaces, particularly in respect of children's play" because it has now become fashionable to make play spaces which do not have enough risk for children to find them enjoyable and challenging. What are you going to do about that?

**Ms Thrift:** Particularly in terms of children's usage of green space, we know from a lot of research that both children and their parents want there to be a recognisable member of staff in a park; whether it is the person running the café or a ranger or a park manager, there is a lot of support for having more staff in parks. A year ago we launched a campaign called Park Force, which was aimed at raising the profile of those people who work in parks and the very good jobs that they do to support children, adults and all who want to enjoy themselves in a park. We have had a lot of support for that campaign and so far 110 local authorities have signed up to make more effort to get more staff into parks and to give them more support. We are continuing that campaign over the next year.

**Q68 Helen Goodman:** That is obviously connected with the discussion of skills on pages 40 and 42. I wonder whether you have anything to say to us about whether or not, in upskilling people working in parks, you are going to address whether they have play skills and skills relevant to children.

**Ms Thrift:** That is a very important issue and this comes back to my previous point to the last questioner. For a long time within the green space sector the focus on skills was all about improving horticultural skills and we are working very hard to raise awareness that actually people who work in parks departments need to have a whole range of skills and working with children and providing play opportunity are some of the skills that need to be provided. Over the next year we are going to be working with the Children's Play Council to help them take forward a lottery funded project to improve play strategies. We are working with them to ensure that that work links in with our work to improve green space strategies and that links are made between those two strategies.

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**Q69 Helen Goodman:** That sounds excellent. On Easter Saturday I opened a new play area in my constituency, in a place called Copley, and this was a partnership including Groundwork, the county council and Living Spaces and so on and so forth. As they said to me, the end result is a fantastic and unique play area and it is. However, I just want to ask you whether you think this is satisfactory. It took four years to pull together the partnership and pull together all the different funding streams. I do not know which of you is responsible for that, but I should like you to comment on that please.

**Mr Hawkhead:** I should be very surprised if Living Spaces had caused the problem there, because we have just had our interim evaluation of Living Spaces and one of the things which most strikes me, reading that evaluation, is the ease with which people have been able to access money to get things done quickly and the simplicity of the application and the simplicity of the funding regime; indeed that was one of the things we set out to do with ODPM from the very start. It is sometimes very difficult, because Groundwork does a lot of this, to get effective partnerships together to take on projects that transform space. That is not for bad reasons: it is often because people fear the responsibility of taking things on like that. One of the things we have really learned from the Living Spaces scheme, and I am sorry to have this word coming up again, is that we used what we call “enablers”, people who would actually work alongside the community group and help them develop the skills they needed, not only to apply for the money, but also to run the scheme afterwards. It is incredibly important. All the evidence we have now for 25 years of Groundwork work is that if you get communities that kind of support, they can take a huge amount of the responsibility themselves.

**Q70 Helen Goodman:** I know that is true, but if you look on page 46 at figure 36, you will see the long list of programmes and the long list of different funding sources and I wonder whether there is any thought about rationalising these long lists.

**Mr Housden:** I mentioned before that the stream of government support for this broad area of policy is being rationalised under the local area agreements’ funding scheme; similarly our schemes are going into it in that way. However, there is a tension in drawing a number of potential funders to the table. The more people who want to support and sponsor improvement of green space the merrier and we need to find sensible ways to enable them to bring that to the table. It is particularly important and the work of Living Spaces on liveability has been very important here, to enable the smaller groups, the very small community groups, to access this funding in a quick, inexpensive, non-bureaucratic way. From the evaluation evidence, that is actually being borne out. Yes, consolidation where that is appropriate, but not at the price of actually dissuading potential additional funders because we are seeing a number of people wanting to bring

their money to the table or, if it just becomes a sort of leviathan that puts off the small community group, then our best interest would not be served.

**Q71 Helen Goodman:** No, clearly there is a tension there between democratic accountability and community participation, I can see that. Back to PPG17. In the consultation document which was issued by ODPM on financing infrastructure through the planning system, there is some information about planning obligations under a development site environment approach, which sounds as though it is about planning in the most environmentally friendly way. Could you explain to me why, in that, it is not going to be obligatory in future to require a particular proportion of land to be reserved for green spaces and children’s play?

**Mr Housden:** The approach that PPG17 takes towards this is to leave it to local determination, on the basis of an audit of provision and an assessment of need, what the best balance for that community is. Alongside that it provides protection for the development of green spaces. So it is a range of criteria and restrictions, including particularly on playing fields. That is the planning approach that has been taken here.

**Q72 Mr Curry:** Leaving aside my sense of bewilderment that this is something the Government think they should be involved in at all, may I resume that line of questioning about the funding sources? If you look at the back of this document, you will find that 154 local authorities are described as urban. They include—you learn something every day—the Isle of Wight. I shall not divert into the urban characteristics of the Isle of Wight. You then look at these funding sources and there are 29 funding sources listed on page 46, some of them dispensing the magisterial amount of £200,000, £500,000, £300,000. Now, spread over even whatever proportion of those local authorities are submitting schemes in any one year, that is absolutely a mass of piddling little sources of money, is it not?

**Mr Housden:** Some of them are very small, you are right.

**Q73 Mr Curry:** Seriously, if you are a local government manager and you have your cabinet member in place, as the National Audit Office wants, and you say “Come on Fred, we need you to do something about this. Let’s work up a scheme” and he says “Are you aware, as a member of the cabinet, just how much management time is going to go in to try to tap these piddling little amounts of funding, how much work we are going to have to do?” do you not think it would be much better to put it into the community programmes, which after all are under huge pressure from the financial restraints on the rate support grant?

**Mr Housden:** That is a very accurate representation. In a past life I was a local authority chief executive, 1994 to 2001, and the circumstances that we faced were exactly as you described. Government, and that of course spanned a period

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of Conservative as well as Labour control, favoured a lot of specific grant regimes that each had their own information and accountability requirements and it was expensive and tiresome, in the way you described, to respond to those. It did not produce much flexibility. From the mid-1990s onwards that tide was turned and progressively, some would argue not sufficiently rapidly, funding from central government has certainly become more generic and more flexible.

**Q74 Mr Curry:** I do not wish to argue with you, but I do not think the tide was turned at that point. It was only about a year ago that the Government said in their local rate support grant settlement that they had to reduce the proportion of specific grants. The tide carried on rising significantly into this Government. I applaud the fact that it is being turned, if it really is going to be turned, but it is still at a much higher benchmark than it was before.

**Mr Housden:** I was thinking particularly, for example, of the single regeneration budget in the mid-1990s which brought together a bewildering number of streams into something you could actually plan against. So the argument was being conducted. The local area agreement framework,<sup>5</sup> where nine government departments have pooled funding in the environmental protection and cultural services block and targeted local authorities who have particular cases of need so they then have flexibility in how they deploy it, is a step forward. We have 88 or 89 this year and shall cover all of the principal local authorities next year.

**Q75 Mr Curry:** On the whole I would subscribe to that, but would you not say that the schemes which seem to work best are those where a significant level of local funding is raised? Is not the best form of community engagement in fund raising? I know from my own constituents, if you want to get people involved in raising money for a scanner—a scanner appeal for the local hospital—the level of community involvement you get when there is a specific target, and often it is a fund-raising target, does seem to be much more effective than some rather nebulous consultation of community representatives, all of whom curiously tend to be the same people.

**Mr Housden:** Yes, that can be very powerful. What you want is a circumstance where the local authority has got funding that is proportionate to its need; so the areas that serve areas of high deprivation are likely to benefit from the

Neighbourhood Renewal Fund, the New Deal for Communities or to be targeted under a local area agreement. You then have the capacity to go to the private sector to seek to match funds, to say “We have this amount of public money, are you interested in coming in to do this?” and to encourage community groups to say that their bit extra will make a difference. That is the powerful proposition.

**Q76 Mr Curry:** As far as I can see there is one case cited here as a particularly good one which is Sheffield Botanical Gardens. There is a major chunk of lottery funding there—and that was before they gave it to Manchester United—there is a significant amount of money put in by the City Council itself, but then a huge amount of local effort as well has gone into raising the funds and would you not say that is the best sort of template there is, if circumstances permit?

**Mr Housden:** That is excellent and Groundwork have an important role and track record of success in enabling community groups to engage in that way. I guess the point would be though that communities will have differential capacities to raise money and that bedrock of funding that I have described is important, but you are quite right to say there are some excellent examples of where communities have done that and that sense of ownership is critical for green space where people feel it belongs to them.

**Q77 Mr Curry:** The biggest source of funding from the private sector down here is planning gain contributions, but you will know there are huge pressures and demands upon planning gains and that planning gain is, I think I am right in saying, the major source of housing funding in the United Kingdom. Not many houses are being built, but many of those that are, are being built with the aid of planning gain. That is a very variable amount of money, is it not? The amount of money you can eke out of planning gain one year, leaving aside the movement to tariffs and the changes in the planning system which are envisaged or being implemented, you cannot really rely on that one can you? You have to have somebody coming along wanting to do something and then you have to be able to beg, borrow or steal from them or brow-beat them into putting in your little project.

**Mr Housden:** The Report interestingly talks about how creatively section 106 agreements, which you are referring to there, have actually been used to support not only very specific developments on a particular site but more broadly. One of the important issues for ministers in considering the role of a planning gain supplement as a future means of raising revenue will be to provide greater flexibility for communities to be able to draw, for the public good, a share of the increasing value that planning consents confer on land and to use it for good purposes.

<sup>5</sup> *Note by witness:* Local area agreement (LAA) framework pools funds from over 100 Government funding lines from across 5 Departments. This funding is additional to the revenue support grant delivered through the Environmental, Protective and Cultural Services. For example the Safer and Stronger Communities Fund, which is pooled within the Safer, Stronger Communities Block (one of the four blocks making up LAAs), delivers funding to those local authorities based on deprivation levels, performance in delivering local environmental services etc. 86 LAAs were agreed in the first and second phases, and the remaining 63 will be adopted in the third phase in 2007/08.

**Q78 Mr Curry:** We are straying here into the Barker Review and I do hope that such a dotty policy will not come into existence quite frankly; and I should be amazed if it did. There are lots of better ways of delivering. The famous 106 agreements funnily enough may turn out to have much more charm than people imagined in terms of their flexibility, but let us leave that particular bit of politics aside. As well as the multifarious sources of funding, there is an awful lot of funders as well, is there not? Even in something like central government support for community involvement, which I see on page 29, there are still six people involved in that. There is a real surfeit of councils here, is there not? It must be wonderfully, remarkably joined up or else an awful lot of people are doing the same thing.

**Mr Housden:** There is a key issue. The upside of that is that the wider recognition of the importance of green space is encouraging potential funders from each potential sector to come forward. That is good. The downside of it is that it can actually create the sort of additional cost and confusion and difficulty at local level and one of our tasks in the further period is to make sure that the green spaces conversation across government is a coherent one. There are some good examples in the report about the way in which, with Defra and other departments, that is being carried out. We have further to go on all of that and the core funding route of local area agreements for local authorities is important. Just to dwell slightly on your point about section 106, that is one example of the way in which councils are thinking broadly about how they can use the range of their powers to improve green spaces. All the evidence suggests that where you get a council that does have a broad view and is creative and even entrepreneurial about the way it does things, that actually produces good green spaces.

**Q79 Mr Curry:** Could I draw your attention to some green space which nobody has mentioned and is not mentioned here? I represent a northern constituency. If you go round some of the great cities and the edges of cities in the North, the green space which is of course the nightmare is the green space between tower blocks. You get the tower blocks and you get absolutely oceans between them of abandoned drug kits and needles and dog dirt and this, that and the other and nobody dares cross them even. That is there, that is present; we need to do something about that. What do you think could be done to enhance that sort of thing, not least to introduce some sort of security into it?

**Mr Housden:** This is a very important point. Fundamentally, those are questions of design and the work that CABE are doing more broadly is very important here in terms of ensuring, where new developments are made or where the significant refurbishments are being undertaken, that green space requirements are taken to the fore. So if you take our housing market renewal programme, for example, in areas of low demand,

then there is a CABE adviser working with each of those areas to make sure that green space is thought through very carefully. The other aspect of that, which can impact upon spaces which are not being redeveloped in that significant way, is that there is a pilot project going on at the moment where two of the leading housing associations, the Peabody Trust and the Notting Hill Housing Association, are working with the Housing Corporation to see what registered social landlords can do in their management of properties they are responsible for to get more effective use of green space. Here again you see that it is not simply an issue about space *per se*, it is about the whole security, the environment and all the considerations that you talked about. These are fundamentally questions of design: you can address them sensibly where you are doing large-scale developments, but we are exploring, the Housing Corporation are exploring, ways in which in the day-to-day management, registered social landlords, local authorities, whoever they might be, can actually address those spaces more positively.

**Q80 Mr Curry:** You made a very helpful suggestion to Mr Khan, which was that if a local authority felt it had more parks than it could handle, it should scale them down and reduce them from perhaps five or six to four. You said you were a chief executive in a local authority, so could you outline for me what procedure you would recommend to your local authority in choosing the one to be shut?

**Mr Housden:** There was a real example of this in Nottinghamshire where we were one of the bidders for the National Academy for Sport, if you can remember the idea that was born that there should be a national centre for excellence for sport and we made a bid with Nottingham University and Loughborough University. One of the key sites for that was the Holme Pierrepont National Water Sports Centre where there is a 2,000-metre rowing course. One of the proposals there was actually to use part of that space to develop the buildings, the facilities, the sports science and the residential facilities that a national centre would require. The judgment that was occupying us all was the extent to which that would represent a valid reduction in the total volume of green space that we actually had. That is the sort of consideration.

**Mr Curry:** That is a very, very specific example, if I may say so, which is unlikely to reproduce itself over most of the local authorities of the United Kingdom.

**Q81 Kitty Ussher:** The report identifies problems relating to getting funding for the ongoing maintenance of urban green spaces as opposed to capital funding. What is the solution to this problem, do you think?

**Mr Housden:** It is interesting that the report also suggests that the significance of that is not lost on funders and quite a lot of the conditions of grant are about making sure there is a sustainable view. You will notice that our own Liveability programme actually said that before we would



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commit capital, we wanted a sustainability plan and the skills to be in place. It is not rocket science: this will be about having a strategy, knowing the spaces that you have, knowing how much they cost to maintain, understanding a business plan, I suppose, about the likely levels of income, what you can do to boost that income through a range of activities and you see a lot more now in green spaces where people are including revenue-raising activities of one type and another. The more enterprising local authorities are actually planning their space on that basis.

**Q82 Kitty Ussher:** How can we encourage more local authorities to be like the best? You are of course right that maintenance funding should be a condition of capital grant, because there is no point making large capital investment if it is then left to decline. My concern is that that will actually deter local authorities from applying for the capital grant when obviously it could be a very exciting project. I have two very specific examples which illustrate the point. When I was a local government councillor, there was this crazy situation where tenants on a very rundown housing estate had managed to secure funding for a football pitch in the local park and the local officers said they did not want it because they could not afford to maintain it. We managed to get that sorted out, but that was their instinct "No we can't have investment". In my own constituency at the moment there is a proposal to have a linear park on an old railway line that runs through Padiham; the Committee will forgive me for being parochial. It is a very exciting project, the railway line has been disused for decades and one of the problems with it is that there is absolutely no funding allocated to keep it maintained. I am not sure that the incentives are correctly there and how do we encourage the spread of best practice there? I am worried the project will not happen because the capacity is not there to solve that problem.

**Mr Housden:** In terms of the technical aspects, through CABE, through Groundwork, through a range of people, we can provide expert advice on the ground to help the local authority make the best of the assets that it has. I guess at the end of the day the local council will be faced with difficult choices and a number of contributions this afternoon have emphasised that reality. We shall need to shape its pattern of spending against that set of priorities. What we have been trying to do, through the local area agreements' process, in ODPM and in other government departments, is to give local authorities more scope to do that by providing flexible funding that they can devote to what they perceive as priorities rather than the individual penny packets. However, it does not provide an automatic solution to those sorts of difficult choices at local level.

**Q83 Kitty Ussher:** You say basically that it is not a problem for you it is a problem for the local authorities.

**Mr Housden:** No, the choices about resources are for local authorities drawing on the range of funding sources that they can access. It is our responsibility to make sure that those funding resources are as flexible and accessible as they can be and things like support for strategy development are available to those people who need it. A final point is that the data that we now have on poor performance and on the availability of good quality green space enables us to go to local authorities, who may not come to us, and say that as far as we are concerned there is a deficit here, they ought to be doing better and to encourage and challenge them.

**Q84 Kitty Ussher:** Could you do me a favour and go to Lancashire County Council and make sure they have the benefit of your total advice on the Padiham linear park, please? The less facetious point is: will you therefore accept the proposal in the NAO Report annex on a financial framework for the management of urban green spaces to help councils make those kinds of funding choices?

**Mr Housden:** We are certainly very attracted by that. It offers a number of enhancements on the existing arrangement, particularly as it has a slightly wider application, it also gets down to the specific cost of individual spaces and your point on Padiham would be exactly about this. We are attracted by that and we need to talk with CIPFA and other professional bodies about how that might be accommodated, but we think that is potentially a very helpful addition to the data source around on this.

**Q85 Kitty Ussher:** But you have not yet decided whether to impose it or make it mandatory.

**Mr Housden:** No, we have not put that as an issue to ministers yet and we would want to do so on the basis of a range of advice.

**Q86 Kitty Ussher:** You quite rightly said that involving and empowering the community often produces the solutions to this type of problem in terms of finding innovative finance mechanisms and so on. I have, I must say, been extremely impressed with the work of Groundwork in my constituency and I am very glad that Groundwork is here. We had a tour quite recently of a few projects. I find that they are often able to achieve results in a way that the local council cannot and I wonder if that means that perhaps they should be financed to a greater extent than the normal funding streams.

**Mr Housden:** I am sure Groundwork would be very grateful for that voice of support.

**Q87 Kitty Ussher:** They did not ask me to say it.

**Mr Housden:** You make a serious point actually that, as a government department seeking to make progress in this enabling way, it is very important that we use people who have the expert skills, yes, but also the capacity to engage with communities in a way a government department or a NDPB, with the best will in the world, cannot do. You see

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in this strategy, particularly CABE Space and Groundwork, who are with us today, as major partners but a range of other bodies who are very important in a volunteering basis or a range of other capacities to this overall effort. To go back to Mr Curry's point about why on earth the Government would get involved in all of this, the style of the engagement is critical really and to help spread best practice but in a way that encourages local authorities to grip this as an issue and to shape it according to their localities, is the direction of travel that the Government are moving on to on this.

**Q88 Kitty Ussher:** How do you measure Groundwork's success in managing urban spaces, empowering, in the work that they do in that regard?

**Mr Housden:** They have a funding agreement with us which specifies particular outcomes that they will deliver on that basis.

**Q89 Kitty Ussher:** So you have a very specific agreement with Groundwork for the use of urban green spaces, but you have absolutely no way of holding local authorities to account because of the democratic issues we discussed previously.

**Mr Housden:** Yes to the first part but no to the second. We can hold local authorities to account and the power of the data which is now becoming available means, probably as importantly, that communities will be able to hold their local authorities to account. The database we are talking about will make plain the way in which local authorities are making progress in these areas and will encourage community groups, through that access, to make representations and apply pressure at local level. We have nine regional offices. They actually deal with the local area agreements, with the local authorities. They know, equipped by us, the ones which are performing relatively poorly. In those discussions they will be pressing those local authorities, providing them with additional support, inviting them to get CABE in. The board which runs the green flag scheme, which we have not talked about particularly this afternoon, is very conscious of the differential impact of that scheme and the way in which that can be used at local level. They are intending to target those areas who have not taken advantage of them to date. We can hold local authorities to account in a quite subtle way.

**Q90 Kitty Ussher:** I hope that we shall be able to, but we have to hold them to account at the moment. The NAO has very helpfully produced a constituency summary for me and other Members and yes, we know how many green flags there are, but there is no available data to make an assessment on efficiency of management of green spaces and we have no data on overall spending. All we have are some residents' satisfaction indicators, which are useful, but absolutely no way of actually holding them to account in terms of the effectiveness of the government spending that they receive.

**Mr Housden:** I agree that we have an incomplete model. To go back to your first point, that is the attraction of a more refined funding model which would enable you to get specifically at those types of measures and to make those available. That is the reason we are interested in them.

**Q91 Kitty Ussher:** We have talked in passing about local authorities deciding that they have a surplus of green spaces. You implied that they may want to generate a capital receipt by selling them off. That is all very well in most of the country where land prices are rising. I have a particular issue in my own constituency where we are creating more open space because a proportion of the houses is being cleared. We are then left with this semi-derelict land in some cases and there are various proposals as part of the Elevate scheme to regenerate that, but there seems to be a general trend towards moving from housing to more open land. Is there any way in which this is taken into account when the funding formula for local authorities is actually determined?

**Mr Housden:** The funding formula dealing with billions of pounds and a very large number of indicators is a pretty blunt instrument and is unlikely to pick up changes at that sort of level. Local authorities thinking about the nature of the green space they have is very important because different spaces have different levels of maintenance and ongoing costs. That is the sort of debate which is important and getting some stronger benchmarks about how much it costs local authorities to maintain a given space, because there are apparently significant variations. This then would go to questions about procurement and how intelligent the local authority's procurement strategy is. All those questions it seems to me speak to this question about spreading best practice to local authorities. That is what we are committed to do and have some important successes in.

**Q92 Helen Goodman:** When I was asking about PPG17 you said that children's interests should be taken into account in the assessment of need. Is it obligatory for local authorities to consult children when they undertake an assessment of need?

**Mr Housden:** They are required within their overall local development framework process to have a statement of community engagement. They have to describe how, for their planning function as a whole, they consult and engage. I do not have the specifics of that here with me. If I may, I shall look to see what it says specifically about children.<sup>6</sup>

**Q93 Helen Goodman:** When the Dobson review was done on how the lottery funds on children's play should be spent they found that children prefer small spaces near them, not one big space in a town. Your ideas about consolidation seem to me to be very adult oriented, because maybe if you are nine you are not allowed to cross a main road, whereas if you are 49 you are. I should just like to

<sup>6</sup> Ev 16-17

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ask you whether it is possible—I do not know whether this is practicable—when you pull together the information that Mr Clark asked for, to look at what provision for children is. That data may not exist.<sup>7</sup>

**Mr Housden:** Indeed. I should be very happy to do that. If I might dwell for a moment on the question, I do not want to be labelled here this afternoon as the man who recommended consolidation. If you take Mr Curry's point about social housing and the concerns in many areas about the maintenance of those green spaces between those sorts of development, the report suggests that local authorities in many cases are not likely to know what it costs them to maintain those, will not in all cases have the most intelligent form of grounds management and maintenance contracts with other people. Part of the issue may well be, in order to provide good quality spaces for children to play in near their homes, to take a more intelligent approach to that sort of issue. I am talking about people looking across the piece at the range of possibilities they have here, using a variety of best practice strategies. This is not a one-shot issue.

**Q94 Greg Clark:** May I through Sir John thank the team for the individual reports to which Kitty Ussher referred and which I certainly found very helpful? If there were the opportunity to do that for other reports, I for one would welcome it.

**Sir John Bourn:** Thank you Mr Clark.

**Q95 Mr Mitchell:** Why is there so little mention in all this of the actual use of the parks and bringing fun and life and entertainment and people back into them? Most of the parks I know are treated a bit like a mausoleum. In several parks I can think of there are bandstands but never any bands in them. There are trees but never any ropes tied to them so that kids can swing like Tarzan. There are ponds or pools with no boats on them and no paddling allowed. There are all sorts of things. You could have concerts, entertainments which could be turned into a veritable funfair. You do not even see mums pushing prams very much. When I was little my mum used to push me around Charlestown Park and cemetery. That is why I have such a gloomy disposition. You do not even see them now. You do not need diplomas in grass growing or cutting or whatever: you need diplomas in fun and turning them into Butlin's to get people back there. Why is there so little emphasis on this?

**Mr Housden:** I agree completely and the points Julia was making about skills would be exactly around all of that and about an integrated strategy. You would want, for example, the people responsible for leisure services in Grimsby to be thinking how they can make best use of their parks.

**Q96 Mr Mitchell:** Are you issuing advice to them on all this?

**Mr Housden:** Very much so. That is what I mean about the integration at local level, people looking across the piece. I mentioned that we were in Mile End the other week. That is exactly what you saw there: a guy running the park who had reached out to the community in lots of different ways saying "Bring what you have here. We can make it better". There are some very exciting examples of the way in which activities were taking place in a park full of people.

**Q97 Mr Mitchell:** How do you spread that? It has not arrived in any of the parks I know.

**Mr Housden:** Our best practice devices, which we talked a bit about this afternoon, are actually making sure that local authorities, both through face-to-face contacts, through training, through websites, through guides, can see what is around and if they need more assistance in seeing that, then we have specific people who can go to them in the localities who have exactly that sense, as you do, about how you can use a public space imaginatively to create fun.

**Q98 Mr Mitchell:** Parks need a manager, somebody who is there to do fun. It is alright to walk around parks, and I did, thinking great thoughts about the future of socialism or, like you, how I can get John Prescott to speak to me and solving the problems of humanity, but they are not meant for lonely cogitation, they are meant for fun. A park manager needs to be a kind of Butlin's manager in a sense. Let me move on to a parochial point which annoyed me. Why have so many of the green flags gone to Lancashire and not to Yorkshire? Lancashire, which is a "mucky 'ole" at the best of times has 17.7 flags per million population; Yorkshire has 3.4 flags per million population. I know we have much more beauty in Yorkshire around us, but why should they do so well on green flags for parks?

**Mr Housden:** The answer is that I do not know. One of the reasons which has been put forward, but your question defeats it, is that it is argued that in Lancashire you have a great tradition of Victorian public parks.

**Q99 Mr Mitchell:** So we have in Yorkshire.

**Mr Housden:** Exactly; so they have in Yorkshire. I do not know. I do know that the green flag board are very interested in this question about the different uptakes and are actually intending to do some active work to see what they can do to make it a more popular scheme.

**Mr Mitchell:** It is lowest in the West Midlands which is the ugliest part of the country. This is an idea of genius, so I am sure you will not mind me bringing it in. Has any serious thought been given to giving the benefactors to parks titles, honours or seats in the House of Lords? The two parks I use most frequently are People's Park in Halifax and

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People's Park in Grimsby were both endowed by the local MP and, I would not want that to become an example, both got titles afterwards.

**Q100 Chairman:** Your place in the House of Lords is secure anyway. Thank you very much. My constituency home is only 14 miles from Grimsby,

so I know it well. I see Mr Matthew that you brought to the Civil Service three years' experience of preparing and implementing a master plan for the development of Cap Estate, a 1,600-acre estate with eight miles of St Lucia coastline, seven beaches and an 18-hole golf course. We need you in Grimsby and can you please bring the sun as well? Thank you very much.

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**Supplementary memorandum submitted by the Department for Communities and Local Government  
(formerly the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister)**

Question 48 (Greg Clerk): *Estimated trends relating to green space*

Accurate and comparable data on urban green spaces to enable trends to be established has not been available in the past. Therefore the Department is developing a green space database for England which will share data about a range of publicly-accessible green spaces (including parks, allotments, playing fields, cemeteries, consistent with the PPG17 typology as far as possible), through a map-based internet tool. This is the first step towards a comprehensive, co-ordinated and consistent base-line that planners and managers of green spaces can use for their green-space audits and assessments.

The Department and other Government bodies already collect data on a variety of green spaces, including parks, cemeteries and burial grounds, allotments, community gardens, playing fields, woodlands, nature reserves. By combining and sharing this data we will be able to build a more detailed picture of the different types of green spaces throughout England and avoid duplication of effort and add value to existing data sets. The Department will be piloting green space data, via the Maps on Tap tool, with key green space stakeholders shortly.

Question 61 (Greg Clark): *Information relating to private gardens*

A snapshot of green spaces (England-wide) in 2001 is available through the Generalised Land Use Database. This category covers all types of green spaces including privately owned, public spaces, rural and agricultural land. GLUD 2001 also provides a measure of the quantity of residential gardens. In 2001 there was approximately 116,044 kilometres squared of green space and 5,472 kilometres squared of domestic gardens in England (source: Generalised land use database 2001, DCLG). GLUD 2005 data is due later in 2006, which should enable some tracking trends in the gross amount of green space and gardens over time. The Department's Generalised Land Use Database (GLUD) will form the foundation of the map described above.

The Department records amounts of land use change in its Land Use Change Statistics. The most recent results (available on Department's website) show that in 2004 22% of the new housing on previously-developed land was on land that was previously residential. Some of this will have involved the replacement of existing dwellings or the addition of extra storeys. The extent of garden space lost is not known. The change would be recorded as from Residential to Residential, private gardens being counted as residential land and not as green space. A further update will be published at the end of May as Land Use Change in England: Residential Development to 2005.

Question 92 (Helen Goodman): *PPG 17 and children*

There is no specific obligation to consult children, but Planning Policy Guidance note 17—Open Space, Sport and Recreation (PPG17) is clear that assessments of need should cover the differing and distinctive needs of the population of their area and the Companion guide gives good practice guidance on ensuring that the needs of children and young people are fully taken into account in the audit and assessment process.

PPG17 also presents an open space typology, based on the work of the Urban Green Spaces Taskforce. This includes a category for provision for children and teenagers—including play areas, skateboard parks, outdoor basketball hoops, and other more informal areas (e.g. teen-shelters).

The Companion Guide to PPG17—Assessing Needs and Opportunities suggests that a steering group for the assessment process should normally include a representative of local children's play interests and young people generally. It also advises that work on the preparation of planning policies and provision standards for open space should draw on existing local strategies, including children's play strategies. Finally, it promotes the Children's Play Council and National Children's Bureau guide to planning for outdoor play, which recommends an approach based on identifying the needs, wishes and entitlements of children and young people.

In preparing the local development documents which form part of the Local Development Framework, local planning authorities are required to engage with the community in accordance with their statements of community involvement. The statement of community involvement sets out the standards to be achieved by the local authority in involving the community in the preparation, alteration and continuing review of all local development documents and planning applications. In particular, the statement of community involvement should set out how the authority will engage with different target audiences and how innovative techniques could be developed to involve traditionally “hard to reach” groups such as young people.

Question 93 (Helen Goodman): *Audit of children’s play provision*

There is no nationally collected data on play areas for children and young people. However, in the next two years the Big Lottery Fund will be distributing funding for play areas to every district and unitary authorities in England, including for developing of play strategies, which is likely to include an audit of existing children’s play provision. We will attempt to capture any data on outdoor public play areas within the green space database.

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