



Research
England

HARNESSING UNIVERSITY-OWNED GREEN SPACES FOR WELLBEING

**EVIDENCE-INFORMED
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR
POLICYMAKERS**

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**National Civic
Impact Accelerator**

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OVERVIEW

In the UK, a third of people cannot access quality natural green spaces within 15 minutes of their home, with deprived communities disproportionately affected. Yet such spaces are crucial in supporting communities to live happier, healthier lives, while also helping the UK to meet its climate ambitions. Indeed, the [National Planning Policy Framework](#) defines green infrastructure as ‘A network of multi-functional green and blue spaces and other natural features, urban and rural, which is capable of delivering a wide range of environmental, economic, health and wellbeing benefits for nature, climate, local and wider communities and prosperity.’

Seeking to improve access, the UK government (Natural England), have worked alongside policymakers, local authorities, academics, industry experts, and businesses to develop the [Green Infrastructure Framework](#). This aims to enable local authorities to work with their communities to develop green spaces or community-led solutions, leading to more sustainable and resilient communities and nature. This work has yet to recognise the role that [university-owned green spaces](#) could play in this agenda - or how local authorities’ new devolved powers could turbo charge the impact of universities’ significant green spaces, ensuring their grounds are used to support health and wellbeing. This could be achieved by enabling communities to use university green spaces to maximise participation in sport and fitness, facilitate social connection, create opportunities for volunteering, and provide a biodiverse environment for people to spend time in.

[Research from the Institute for Community Studies](#) at The Young Foundation (2025) maps university green space in relation to underlying mental health and wellbeing data and evaluates the social, cultural and environmental work taking place in universities across the country. In doing so, the research starts to unpack the role and impact that universities green spaces could have in their surrounding communities.

This policy paper now aims to connect the key findings and recommendations emerging from that research to current and potential policy opportunities, outlining how policymakers and partners could work with universities and other key stakeholders, particularly estates teams, to drive access to and uses of green spaces that positively impact communities and places. This paper is presented in three sections, each giving an overview of findings within a specific theme, relevant best practice examples within the research, and discussion of potential policy levers that could help scale up these approaches and support change.

The paper’s final conclusions and recommendations summarise the opportunities that university green spaces can offer within their communities, and crosscutting interventions and policies that could be used to maximise them.

The three themes are:

1. Harmonising biodiversity with community
2. Communities of practice
3. Effectively funding green spaces

HARMONISING BIODIVERSITY WITH COMMUNITY

Overview and best practice

The Institute for Community Studies research highlighted that universities have been on a journey when it comes to nurturing biodiversity, moving away from manicured lawns towards actively cultivating diverse wildflower landscapes.

What this means in practice is that many of their estates teams have gained a wealth of expertise in how to work with communities, to ensure these spaces benefit both citizens and the environment, actively encouraging people to help the university deliver on their biodiversity goals. This is reflected in some universities being recognised for their work, by achieving Green Flag status.

The next step in meeting their biodiversity goals is to ensure the biological and social dynamics of these spaces connect with one another. This means developing green spaces that offer a range of different environments, that encourage different kinds of use, to meet the diverse needs of students, staff, local communities, and nature - and universities' net zero ambitions.

An example of such an approach in action is the University of the West of England's (UWE) BEELINE initiative, which aims to create a connected network of small-scale bioscapes across the UWE campus focused on growing fruit and food, providing rest for students and staff, and also increasing biodiversity and attracting pollinators.

Developed in tandem with a wider interest in social prescribing on campus, the project has delivered:

- 130 sessions per week, including forest bathing, open-water swimming, yoga and trail walking.
- a catering offer, where students sow, grow, harvest, and eat their own produce.
- pollinator-friendly planting (including herbs, fruits or vegetables)
- a place to rest in each 'parklet'.
- Work-related training for students. For example, English students developing advertisement copy for initiatives; business studies students developing business cases for green spaces; and architecture students learning how they could use natural materials in their modelling.

The next phase is the development of impact metrics, documenting the breadth of value university green spaces can provide.

The BEELINE is testament to what can be achieved on a relatively small scale with a modest budget, with the potential for wider-ranging outcomes through relevant partnerships, measurement frameworks, and regional learning networks.

Crucial to building on such success is finding sustainable resources (skills, knowledge, funding and time) to plan, develop and maintain green spaces best practice that can help to deliver healthier, more sustainable and resilient communities and nature in their place. This is currently especially difficult, due to the financial crisis that many universities find themselves in, putting at risk not just best practice, but also the learning that has taken place to date and potentially the green spaces themselves, if universities are forced to sell land.

Supporting policy ambitions

The English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill would see regions given responsibility for seven [Areas of Competence](#). These are:

- transport and local infrastructure
- skills and employment support
- housing and strategic planning
- economic development and regeneration
- environment and net zero
- health, wellbeing and public service reform
- public safety

This offers opportunities for real alignment between universities and Combined Authorities, which can be focused on maximising the positive impact of green spaces. This can give regional policymakers the chance to develop policy and provision to meet the health, business, research and transport targets set out by the government in the devolution white paper.

Health

Universities are well placed to be able to support local partners, working together to develop provision that utilises green spaces to deliver positive health and wellbeing outcomes for people living in their region. This can be achieved while also researching, testing, and advocating for sustainable green spaces, and identifying what is required to ensure these spaces are supported to thrive. For example, Combined Authorities could be tasked with new bespoke duties ‘in relation to health improvement and health inequalities’, through their sixth area of competence (health, wellbeing and public service reform), within the new Integrated Settlements. Universities green spaces can support Combined Authorities to deliver on these new duties for the region, working in partnership to utilise their green spaces and relevant research to support policymakers’ decision-making and to test new approaches.

Business and research

Green sustainable spaces, if nurtured effectively, can deliver a variety of different outcomes for both the community and the local economy by building on the historic and traditional uses of these spaces, alongside new and developing social activities and traditions. An example of this in practice is the [Brown to Green project](#) run by Northumberland University, which has empowered communities to participate in neighbourhood planning initiatives, shaping post-industrial waterfront areas into green spaces that will attract visitors.

In terms of how this could support policymakers, in the English devolution white paper, Strategic Authorities are highlighted as being ‘key partners’ in helping the UK government boost culture, heritage and tourism. Green spaces can play a crucial role and if effectively funded can increase economic activity, by creating well-known areas of natural beauty, that can boost the visitor economy.

As a starting point, Strategic Authorities could look to work with communities and universities, to explore what heritage and culture means to their places. This will help them understand which green spaces are important to their community, what is required to ensure they are well maintained and, where possible, enable them to work with universities to maximise access to university-owned green spaces for local people. A medium-term ambition is for these spaces to become destinations people outside the local community wish to visit.

Transport

The Institute for Community Studies research found that those developing ‘active travel’ infrastructures could look to university-owned green spaces as an important asset for improving connections, by linking them up with the wider network of green transport corridors. This could create more direct routes for those looking to walk and cycle, with one of the potential benefits being an increase in people choosing green transport options, due to the reduced time it would take to make a green journey.

Expanding green corridors will be one of the policy opportunities that Combined Authorities will have the power to deliver through the new devolution agreements and the resulting consolidation of current budgets. This is recognised in the devolution white paper, which says that Combined Authorities will be in charge of active travel planning for their region, requiring them to plan for the creation of both the built environment (all human-made surroundings) and infrastructure, while investing in, and ensuring that communities have good access to, new cycle paths, pedestrian-friendly spaces, and public transport services.

Universities and Combined Authorities could start by working together to identify any underutilised university green spaces (as the research found many that institutions were not aware of), that could unlock better greener transport options for their communities.

Environment and climate change

Universities can support their region to develop, deliver, and evaluate the impact that green spaces can have in reaching local environmental and climate change targets. This is due to the green or sustainable developed and maintained spaces they own, their research expertise, experience developing education and training, their land management teams, and well-developed partnerships within their places.

In terms of where there is a clear fit with local policy, the new devolution framework should see Combined Authorities tasked with delivering and developing Local Nature Recovery Strategies, alongside the wider environmental delivery that councils already lead. This new role will require them to convene partnerships, and coordinate action, funding, and investment in nature recovery and wider environmental delivery across their areas - while also developing the capacity to monitor and report on the impact of the work they deliver.

The Institute's research highlights three potential ways in which the work already being delivered by universities could support Combined Authority policymakers, developing their partnership on environment and climate change work. The first of these is the chance to fund universities to use their green spaces and research teams to test, deliver and track innovative ways that green spaces can reduce carbon emissions. Secondly, where university land management teams are already focused on delivering nature recovery, and have experience in how this can be done alongside communities, policymakers should look to work with them to understand the impact of the work and how any positive results from their research can be effectively delivered in other areas of the region. Finally, where universities are developing and delivering climate education to communities in their green spaces, helping people to understand the importance of saving these vital ecosystems, policymakers should work with them to understand the value of this work and how any positive outcomes could be delivered across the region.

COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

Overview and best practice

In the research, the Institute for Community Studies team conducted interviews with relevant members of university staff who work with, on, or in university green spaces. What emerged from these interviews is a strong appetite to develop a community of practice around green space management.

University estate teams were both eager to invite colleagues from different institutions to come and see their sites and ways of working, and also keen to learn from other institutions (both within the UK, and around the world) about what is working well.

This happens in a relatively ad-hoc way at the moment, but there is scope to develop a coherent community of practice around university green space management, which could then be expanded to all green spaces within the region, and even more broadly across the UK. This may include annual conferences, place-based knowledge exchanges between institutions, or – more ambitiously – innovative challenge prizes that push groups of estates teams to deliver particular outcomes.

Supporting policy ambitions

A good starting point for those at universities working on green spaces and looking to engage policymakers about their work on communities of practice is through the [Green Infrastructure Framework](#), produced by Natural England. This framework supports local authorities to work with their communities to develop community-led solutions maximising the use of green spaces, and – overarchingly – considers how these spaces can help communities lead healthier, more sustainable lives, while also letting nature thrive. This chimes with universities' civic goals.

University green spaces, infrastructure (both physical and people), and research, offer Natural England and local authorities the potential to test the impact of innovative approaches, and to learn from the best practice that is already happening in universities across the UK. This partnership should also consider how university green spaces could be made more available to communities, with the aim of maximising participation in sport and fitness, facilitating social connection, creating opportunities for volunteering, and providing a biodiverse environment for local communities to spend time in.

Alongside developing a deeper relationship with Natural England, universities can support Combined Authorities, by helping them to consider how green spaces can support two of the Devolution Bill's proposed Areas of Competence (housing and strategic planning; health, wellbeing and public service reform), which they will be responsible for under the new settlements. Specifically, this can be helpful where there is the possibility to intertwine relevant outcomes and funding to deliver green healthy spaces and outcomes at a lower cost. For example, planning responsibilities for designated Local Green Spaces through local and neighbourhood plans, could be adjoined to a new duty that requires strategic authorities to 'have regard to the need to improve health and reduce health inequalities' when exercising their functions. By working together between departments and with universities, there is a chance to recognise best practice that can meet both aims, while also delivering value for money.

Relevant Combined Authorities policies

Environment and climate change

With the Devolution White Paper, Combined Authorities will be tasked with delivering – and, in time, developing - Local Nature Recovery Strategies. This will require them to coordinate action and funding, while also monitoring and reporting on delivery. The work undertaken by university estates teams, alongside their research colleagues, means that universities are uniquely placed to support such work.

Universities are already working with local authorities to unlock green spaces, such as [Green Corridors](#), or utilise co-designed data-gathering technologies to empower local residents to [reinvent existing spaces as green spaces](#). It is a logical next step to include university green spaces and wider staffing infrastructure in any future green spaces work. This would enable universities to better-utilise these spaces and empower staff to develop effective communities of practice driving the impact of the work undertaken by Combined Authorities. This might involve testing new approaches with proven thought leaders, who have expertise in developing and delivering research, education and community engagement.

Hitherto, the work undertaken by Natural England has had little focus on university estates or the opportunities that could arise from opening up university green spaces. By working with university leaders and policymakers, such as Universities UK (UUK), there is a chance for Natural England to recognise, in the [Green Infrastructure Framework](#), how local authorities can work with universities to maximise the green space within a region.

The areas of the Green Infrastructure Framework Process Guide for Local Planning Authorities that could initially be worth policymakers from universities and Natural England exploring are:

- How universities could use their green spaces and expertise in communities of practice to help deliver their communities' and stakeholders' work.
- Creating partnerships between councils and universities that explore innovative thinking, focused on bringing in challenging voices from both current and new partners to shape solutions.
- Using areas of research interest to task universities with tackling one of the strategy's core aims of reducing health inequalities, by focusing on how green spaces can be used to identify and deliver health solutions. This research could be developed in partnership with local people using community-centred approaches.

Aside from the green infrastructure framework, Natural England could also develop a strategic relationship directly with university policymakers such as UUK, focused on aligning their green infrastructure strategies, and ensuring that knowledge exchange between partners – and, where possible, local communities - are able to take place.

EFFECTIVELY FUNDING GREEN SPACES

Overview and best practice

One of the key findings from the Institute for Community Studies research is that current funding issues in universities mean all teams are tasked with fundraising and reducing financial risks from work they are already delivering.

This was reflected in the interviews, where estates teams shared the pressures they feel to see students as their “primary customers and clients”, maximising the potential income of every square metre of land on a campus. They feel an expectation to deliver more with less, which is reflected in the interest in biodiverse environments increasing, while the financial resource to undertake such work remains static.

This raises the need to consider how to measure the impact of university green spaces (and green spaces in general) beyond the money they can generate. How can these teams quantify the value of friendships made and sustained; wellbeing supported; and improved connections with neighbouring communities? For this to happen, it is crucial to develop a language and approach that works for all green space users, stakeholders and policymakers, recognising what ‘good’ looks like, and identifying the holistic value of these green spaces. This is especially important as universities struggle for revenue, putting some of these green spaces at risk of being changed into brown spaces (for example, used for offices or housing).

Supporting policy ambitions

Ensuring that these green spaces are utilised and meet both universities’ and wider communities’ needs is crucial to maximising their social value. Combined Authorities are well placed to support, working with universities to secure ongoing funding that ensures these spaces are well maintained, are made available to the surrounding communities, and are used to research how green spaces across the region can be used to deliver maximum benefits.

The clearest current mechanism that could be used to deliver on all the above opportunities is the ‘Areas of Competence’ mandate the government plans to extend to Combined Authorities. This will empower Combined Authorities to develop and deliver strategic work that drives regional growth, shapes public services and maximises the impact of green spaces.

Universities can support Combined Authorities with these ambitions, with five of the six ‘Areas of Competence’ - all but ‘public safety’ - presenting potential opportunities to align outcomes with green spaces. However, it’s important to recognise that large areas of these competencies do not fall within this remit, from a policy perspective, so universities and Combined Authorities could work together to identify *where* green spaces can play a role in achieving their targets - and then use relevant funding to protect and maximise the benefits of these spaces.

One route for achieving these co-benefits would be for civic agreements to develop a green spaces chapter. This would require all civic partners to work together to develop a green spaces framework and develop effective funding mechanisms, that ensure green spaces are maintained, and ensure effective research and data are collected to reflect the impact these spaces have on their communities.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

University green spaces can positively impact health and wellbeing across their local places, reaching diverse communities, while also supporting policymakers to deliver on their biodiversity, travel, employment and skills, and research targets. However, policymakers have yet to develop effective partnerships with those who manage university green spaces - limiting the understanding and potential of these spaces, what 'good' looks like, and how university green spaces can be managed in a sustainable way.

Going forward, regional policymakers should work with universities to ensure that the green spaces they manage positively impact the surrounding communities, with a medium-term aim to develop green spaces that support policymakers to also meet the relevant devolved Areas of Competence assigned to them by the government's devolution bill.

This requires closer relationships between local government, universities and community stakeholders with the aim of:

- Developing a green spaces theme within Combined Authorities' work. This should support and grow effective community-accessed, university-owned and university-managed green spaces that help to deliver better health and wellbeing outcomes for communities
- Securing investment for campus services that supports both biodiversity and human wellbeing
- Developing shared measurement frameworks, evaluation tools, and research with local partners that reflect the impact of green spaces across the region
- Developing a 'green spaces' chapter within civic agreements between universities and key anchor institutions in their place, such as local government, The NHS and colleges. With the aim of bringing partners and stakeholders together to establish a regional strategy for how to maximise the impact of green spaces in their place and for local communities.



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