Improving quality of place

Introduction

Quality of place is an attribute given to a place by the community. As John Prescott once said, quality places 'are characterised by streets, parks and open spaces that are clean, safe and attractive – areas that local people are proud of and want to spend time in' (ODPM, 2002). Improving quality of place is vital if the Government is to deliver on its commitments and make the UK fairer, safer, healthier, more prosperous and sustainable (CLG, 2009).

Benefits

The benefits to individuals and society of improved sense of place, coupled with an increase in sense of belonging, social interaction and activity, all bring about enhanced community cohesion. In addition, reductions in crime and anti-social behaviour bring with them enhanced feelings of safety, security and willingness to use a place: overall, an improved quality of life.

Evidence linked to quality of place

GI is pivotal to providing quality of place, for example:

- High quality places are marked out by safe, attractive and well-managed parks and green play spaces, and have ample green infrastructure (GI) too (CLG, 2009).
- Burgess *et al.* (1988) report that unofficial green areas are extremely important for local people and that 'the most valued open areas are often the intimate and familiar ones which play a part in people's daily lives, rather than the distant parks and outstanding landscapes far from home'.
- Swanwick (2009) noted that highly valued green spaces enhance the positive qualities of urban life, offer a variety of opportunities and physical settings and encourage sociability and cultural diversity.
- Dunnett *et al.* (2002) suggest that people can describe their aspiration for ideal, improved green space, which can be gathered under three themes: overall design, specific measures to meet people's needs, the nature of management.
- Hitchings (2009), working with a single cohort of city lawyers in London, reported that if spaces are more widely available, physically improved, appropriate and practical, as well as meeting psychological needs, then more people could benefit from them more of the time.
- Non-use of green space is often associated with a number of barriers, including too busy/not interested (Dunnett *et al.*, 2002). However, non-users of green space also report the quality of place and quality of life benefits afforded by GI (Forest Research, 2008; 2009).

Practical considerations

Delivering quality of place doesn't have to be about creating new green spaces, but about improving the quality and utility of what is already there. As CABE Space (2005) observe, there is a lot of GI around us, but there is a need to make the most of what exists by raising its quality.

Just as the barriers to green space use are lack of or poor quality facilities, anti-social behaviour, concerns over dogs and dog mess, safety (real or perceived), environmental quality issues and lack of variety, the defining components of the ideal green space are the opposite. These include vegetation, water, play opportunities, facilities/comforts (seats, toilets, shelters), good access, sports, events, value-for-money refreshments, environmental quality (including litter bins, lighting and vandalism) and specific features such as a maze or a sculpture (NAO, 2006).

Hitchings (2009) also noted that it is worth considering the wider routines and behaviours exhibited in green spaces, much more than just the facilities provided. In this way green spaces can to be aligned to help fulfil daily routine, such as lunching, use as a thoroughfare, or in a variety of social activities.

Image is all important. A report by the Land Use Consultants (2004) showed that poor quality green space can negatively affect local activities and business, undermining an area's image and the confidence of both local inhabitants and potential investors.

Natural vegetative regeneration of a green open space may take several years for grasses and wildflowers and tens of years for trees.

Links to climate change

The main link between GI and delivering a quality of place is the potential reduction in CO_2 emissions gained through the use of GI as a walking and cycling network, thus reducing the number of car journeys taken.

Delivering a quality of place by planting new trees increases carbon sequestration, and can help to mitigate climate change.

Tools

Tools for assessing the quality of a place (specifically, people's perceptions of a place) include:

Spaceshaper by CABE
This practical toolkit measures the quality of a public space before investing time and money in improving it. (http://www.cabe.org.uk/public-space/spaceshaper)
Green Flag Award
This is the national standard for parks and green spaces in England and Wales. (http://www.keepbritaintidy.org/GreenFlag/).

Greenstat by Greenspace
This subscription-based, on-line database, analysis, benchmarking and networking system is used for assessing user satisfaction with management and maintenance of parks and green spaces (http://www.greenstat.org.uk/)

A number of tools have been prepared to determine the value of a park or green spaces or their assets. These include:

Staysafe
This is a software derivative of Playsafe, which is a playground asset management and inspection software. Staysafe can calculate the capital value of each item held on an asset inventory. It can be used to identify and report faults and specify how caused. It is used to generate work schedules for the park service providers.

Confirm
This infrastructure management software system enables the management of: roads and other highway infrastructure; property; parks; trees; refuse collection and waste management; and streetlights. It has an asset management module that can log the location of assets and any work that has been completed on it. It can calculate the asset value using any formula required, such as historic cost, replacement value. Used extensively in the UK for highways asset management planning, but not for asset valuation of green spaces.

TAES: towards an excellent service
A diagnostic tool for green space management organisations that can be used to accurately define performance against a model of best management practice. TAES covers standards of service, use of resources, policy and strategy, leadership, performance management and learning, people management, partnership working and community engagement. See CABE Space (2009) for example of uses.

Case studies

Cydcoed, Wales
http://www.forestresearch.gov.uk/pdf/Cydcoed_final_report_Jan09.pdf/

Glasgow Green, central Glasgow
http://www.glasgow.gov.uk/en/Residents/Parks_Outdoors/Parks_gardens/glasgowgreen.htm

Manor and Castle Green Estates, Sheffield
http://www.cabe.org.uk/case-studies/manor-and-castle-green-estate
http://www.neighbourhoodsgreen.org.uk/ng/casestudies/conference/sheffieldWildlife3.asp

Newlands and Newlands Street Trees
http://www.forestry.gov.uk/newlands and http://www.newlandsproject.co.uk/

Knowledge gaps

- Specific costs of regenerating brownfield to green space are not freely publicly available. Publication of unit costs is required to support design, delivery and maintenance of new green spaces.
- There is no tangible economic evidence for the value of quality of place, afforded by GI.
- UK-based evidence is required on the relationships between people, places and landscape.
- Knowledge is required on personal and social influences on green space use to direct site design as well as urban design planning.
- It is unclear what qualities and configuration contribute to use and increasing use of GI by all segments of society.
- Comprehensive analysis of public funds spent on GI, in comparison to grey and blue infrastructure, is required
- Non-use of green space is often a lifestyle choice. The question remains over whether those who do not visit woodland, for example, do use, for example, parks.
- The significance of incentives and events on use of GI is unknown.
- There is a significant amount of good research on park quality, use and design, and this information is also required for other green spaces.

Citations of national policies/priorities

World class places: the Government's strategy for improving quality of place
12 May 2009
http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/planningandbuilding/worldclassplaces

Communities in control: real people, real power
9 July 2008
http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/communities/communitiesincontrol

Public Service Agreement 21: build more cohesive, empowered and active communities
October 2007
http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/d/pbr_csr07_psa21.pdf

Strong and prosperous communities
26 October 2006
http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/localgovernment/strongprosperous

Sustainable communities: building for the future
5 February 2003
http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/communities/sustainablecommunitiesbuilding
Living places: greener, safer, cleaner.
19 September 2006
http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/communities/livingplacescleaner

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Burgess, M., Harrison, C.M. and Limb, M. (1988). People, parks and the urban green: a study of popular meanings and values for open spaces in the city. *Urban Studies* **25**, 455–473.

CABE Space (2005). *Start with the park. Creating sustainable urban green spaces in areas of housing growth and renewal.* CABE, London.

CABE Space (2009). *Making the invisible visible: the real value of park assets.* CABE, London.

CLG (2006). *Planning policy guidance 17: planning for open space, sport and recreation.* Originally published by ODPM in 2002. CLG, London.

CLG (Department of Communities and Local Government) (2009). *World class places: The Government's strategy for improving quality of place.* CLG, London.

Dunnett, N., Swanwick, C. and Woolley, H. (2002). *Improving urban parks, play areas and green spaces.* Urban Research Paper. DTLR, London.

Forest Research (2008). *A valuation of the economic and social contribution of forestry for people in Scotland.* Final report for Forestry Commission Scotland. Forest Research, Farnham.

Forest Research (2009). *Monitoring and evaluating quality of life for CSR 07.* Final annual report 2008/9: Deliverable 7.1.1. Report to the Forestry Commission.

Hitchings, R. (2009). *Indoor office workers and outdoor nature: a research report.* UCL Department of Geography, London.

Land Use Consultants (2004). *Making the links: greenspace and quality of life.*

NAO (2006). *Enhancing urban green space.* Report by the comptroller and auditor general. HC 935 Session 2005-2006. National Audit Office, London.

ODPM (2002). *Living places: greener, safer, cleaner.* ODPM, London.

Swanwick, C. (2009). Society's attitudes to and preferences for land and landscape. *Land Use Policy* **26** (1), S62–S75.