

Clean Up, Green Up and Level Up: how to build a future city

Introduction

In 2007 the world passed a little-noticed but critical landmark: the point at which for the first time in history, more humans were living in towns and cities than in the countryside. In England 80% of us now live in urban areas, and the populations of many towns and cities have doubled over the past 20 years. Both England's urban environments, and our urban population, are continuing to grow.

In praise of cities

Cities are good things. They are more efficient at using resources, so they are a critical ingredient in securing a sustainable economy. They put out less carbon per person than rural areas, so they are critical in tackling climate change. They are centres of economic activity, knowledge and innovation. They produce most of the resources we need to create the cleaner, greener world we all want. And they offer social, educational, cultural and other opportunities that can be hard or impossible to access in many rural environments. It is not for nothing that the word civilisation comes from the Latin for city.

So what we want in future is not fewer cities but better ones: using resources much more efficiently, creating much less pollution for all, with more green and blue spaces to which all city-dwellers have equal access, so that our cities are a joy to live in for everyone. In short we need to make our cities what the UN Sustainable Development Goals say they should be: "inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable".

The state of the urban environment: good news – it's better than it was....

Successful towns and cities depend on the state of the urban environment. That is why it is the focus of a new report the Environment Agency is launching today. In many respects the environment is much better in our towns and cities than it was fifty years ago.

Cities are much better now at recycling and reusing the waste they create rather than dumping it in rivers or landfill: in 2019, waste recovery or reuse at the sites regulated by the Environment Agency improved to a record 74%. Urban air is far cleaner now than it was due to better regulation, legislation and technology. So is the water: the industrial revolution turned the rivers in our cities black and killed off most of their wildlife. Most urban rivers are now blue again and trout have returned to them.

There's more. Surprisingly large parts of our cities are not concrete-grey but grass-green. What is called "natural land cover" – grassland, scrub, parks, allotments, public gardens, playing fields, golf courses and other

'green' spaces – makes up some 30% of the urban area in England.

These green spaces aren't just places for city-dwellers to play, relax and enjoy nature. They also have major practical benefits. They remove air pollution, reduce noise, provide wildlife habitats, support biodiversity, absorb and store carbon, help keep cities cool, reduce flood risk by absorbing rainfall, support the local economy by attracting customers and investors to businesses near green space, provide a greater sense of place, foster social cohesion, and – partly by providing opportunities for recreation but mostly just by existing – improve people's mental and physical wellbeing. It would not be too fanciful to say that for the amount of good they do for cities and their inhabitants, there is literally nothing that beats a good green or blue space.

Bad news: things are not as good as they should be, and some are getting worse

But we shouldn't overdo the celebrations. Much of that progress has stalled in the last decade or so, and big challenges remain. Air pollution in some of our cities is still exceeding World Health Organisation guidelines. The quality of the water in our urban rivers is under new pressure from pollutants, population growth and the climate emergency. And the amount of green space in our cities is going down: in our urban areas in England it dropped from 63% in 2001 (including domestic gardens) to 55% in 2018.

Green and blue inequality

It gets worse. Whether you are benefiting from the green and blue space in most of our cities depends largely on who you are and where you live. Deprived communities have much less access.

Many city-dwellers do not live within easy walking distance of a local park, playing field, garden or other green space. Those who do tend to be the rich ones: 59% of households in the top 10% income bracket are within a 10-minute walk of a publicly-accessible green space compared with just 35% in the bottom 10% income bracket. Moreover, the quality of parks, other green spaces and rivers is often lower in deprived areas, which means people derive less benefit from them. They are also less likely to visit them at all, because people will naturally avoid going to places which are unsafe, unloved or run-down.

There are also racial disparities: city communities with 40% or more residents from minority ethnic backgrounds have access to 11 times fewer green spaces locally than those comprising mainly white residents. It's not just green space: other disparities

It is no surprise that the benefits of city living are not equitably shared: since the first cities were built thousands of years ago, they never have been. Having money gives people the power to choose where they live, and given the choice most of us would prefer to live in clean green environments.

But the disadvantages poorer urban communities now suffer are not just lack

of access to good quality green and blue space. In modern cities poorer communities also have higher exposure to air pollution, flood risk, poor water quality in rivers, and to the smell, noise and pollution that comes from industrial or waste sites. So poorer urban communities aren't just disadvantaged economically: they are also disadvantaged environmentally.

And because of the link between your environment and your health, poorer communities are also disadvantaged in health terms too. There is a clear correlation between life expectancy in the least and most deprived areas of the country. The gap in healthy life expectancy (years lived in good health) between the different areas of England is around 19 years. According to the Office of National Statistics, a man born in Richmond-upon-Thames can expect to live 71.9 years, compared with only 53.3 years for a man in Blackpool. A woman born in Wokingham can expect to live 72.2 years, compared to only 54.2 years in Nottingham.

Most of these inequalities are being exacerbated by the climate emergency as it brings more extreme weather, more damage to the environment and so more harm to people's health. We know that in developing countries, climate change does most damage to the most vulnerable, because they have the least capacity to adapt to its consequences. We also know they are also the people who bear least responsibility for causing the problem in the first place. A similar injustice is happening here. Deprived communities who have smaller carbon footprints and pollute less than wealthier communities often live in areas of higher pollution which are less resilient to the effects of climate change.

The solution: clean up, green up, and level up

So we are not yet where any of us wants to be. How then can we create cities that are genuinely inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable? Answer: clean up, green up, and level up. Clean up: while our towns and cities are much cleaner than they were, there is a lot more still to do to improve air quality, stop the pollution of rivers, tackle offensive waste sites and remediate land previously contaminated by industrial use. The responsibility for pollution, and for making sure it doesn't happen, lies with those who pollute. But the Environment Agency is playing its part in tackling all those issues alongside the local authorities and others.

Green up: creating more and better green and blue spaces in our cities doesn't just have to mean creating new parks or public gardens. Often the best green and blue spaces, and the ones that tend to benefit the most deprived communities, are part of something else, and do many things at once. Putting grass on rooftops, creating ponds on small patches of grass between buildings, planting trees in the right place and so called Sustainable Drainage Systems all help reduce flooding, improve water quality in urban rivers and streams, enhance biodiversity and create wider benefits for people who live nearby. A flood defence doesn't have to be a concrete wall: it can be a green earth bank with flowers, trees, gardens, walkways and cycle tracks; or a grass-covered storage basin that turns from green to blue when it fills up in high rainfall, preventing nearby homes and businesses from flooding.

So more green and blue space would provide many benefits for those who live in cities. It would also help the whole nation's economy and health, because the NHS could save over £2 billion in treatment costs if everyone in England had equal access to good quality green space. And it would help the planet, because greener cities put out less carbon, helping tackle the climate emergency; and have more wildlife, helping tackle the biodiversity crisis.

Level up: the government is right to be focusing on levelling up. As I've sought to illustrate, the inequalities in this country are not just economic. Levelling up the environment so that it is better for everyone – rich and poor, black and white – is as important as levelling up the economic opportunities. And the two are linked: investing in a better environment, whether that's a park, a flood defence or a clean river, will also create jobs and growth. Since the worst environments tend to be in the poorest places, tackling them is a double win: it will make poorer communities both greener and richer.

How is as important as what

How we work is as important as what we do. We and other organisations like us must make sure that we pay full attention to fixing the problems where poorer urban communities live – because those problems tend to be worse and more harmful – and do not just focus on areas which are better off and better able to lobby the authorities. We need to be the Environment Agency for everyone in this country, not just for some.

And we can only create better places for local people if we actually listen to what they want, rather than simply impose what we think is the right answer. That is why the Environment Agency does a lot of consultation with local communities – on proposed new flood schemes, on plans for waste incinerators etc – and why we often do adjust our plans in the light of what we hear, sometimes radically.

But the Environment Agency is not yet listening as hard as we should to some communities, particularly poorer, disadvantaged or ethnic minority communities. Nor – and this is part of the problem – are we yet doing well enough in recruiting, retaining and promoting staff from ethnic minorities. The EA is not alone in that: a 2017 report by the Policy Exchange think tank ranked 'environment professionals' as the second least ethnically diverse profession in England, after farming. We in the Environment Agency, and the environment sector as a whole, need to value workforce diversity as much as we value biodiversity.

The Environment Agency is trying to do something about that. We are seeking to ensure that we understand better the environmental threats that affect disadvantaged communities, like flooding and air pollution. We are seeking to build stronger partnerships with those communities, to help keep them safe when flooding happens and to design with them the better places to live that they and we want. Example: in Luton, we have constructed the Houghton Brook Flood Storage Area which directly benefits over 600 homes and businesses. Many of those benefiting are ranked within the 40% most deprived areas in the UK. And we are working to recruit more staff ourselves from urban

communities, from disadvantaged backgrounds, and from ethnic minorities, so that we better represent, better understand and better serve the whole of modern Britain.

Conclusion

That's over two thousand words. But I can sum up in only six words how our future cities should be: green and blue – and just too.