

Case Study:

HOW IS BIRMINGHAM LEVELLING UP BY IMPROVING ITS PARKS AND GREEN SPACES?

December 2022

ADEPT

The Association of Directors of Environment, Economy, Planning & Transport

INTRODUCTION

The government has committed to delivering a 'nature positive' future in which we leave the environment in a better state than we found it and halt species decline by 2030. Key policy developments include the [25 Year Environment Plan](#) and the [Environment Act 2021](#).

Meanwhile the Environment Agency's [State of the Environment](#) report (2021) found that the pandemic has exposed and amplified green inequality in society: *"Too many towns and cities in England, especially those with a strong industrial heritage, have too little green space, too few trees, culverted rivers, poor air quality and are at risk of flooding."*

Birmingham is the largest local authority in the UK with a population of around 1.1 million people. It is the seventh most deprived local authority in England, with 43% of the population living in areas within the 10% most deprived in England.

Birmingham City Council (BCC) published the ['Our Future City Plan'](#) in 2021 setting out a vision and strategy for inclusive growth that would respond to challenges facing the city including climate change, the move to digital technology and need to deliver affordable and attractive places to live.

The strategy identified actions grouped into five themes, one of which stating that Birmingham would be a 'City of Nature', with nature at the heart of the city and residents able to access a diverse range of green and open spaces.

Birmingham has around 600 parks and open spaces, many of which were inherited from its Victorian past. They are some of the city's most used leisure and recreation facilities with estimates suggesting over 58 million person visits per year.



NATURALLY BIRMINGHAM

Recognising the importance of green spaces to health and wellbeing, and the need to improve access and quality of green spaces in the city, Birmingham bid for funding as part of the Future Parks Accelerator Programme.

The Future Parks Accelerator was a collaboration between the National Lottery Heritage Fund, National Trust and the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, running from 2019-2022. It covered nine local authority areas and was designed to protect and develop natural resources in urban areas.

Birmingham was successful in winning for £1.2 million funding to establish the Naturally Birmingham project, supporting up to eight members of project staff.

Naturally Birmingham focused on four pilot projects exploring how parks and green spaces could be improved. These focused on four themes, each linked to specific urban spaces:

- **Housing:** looking at how high-quality green spaces and features could be built into new development
- **Children:** focussing on the early years sector and increasing access to outdoor space and nature
- **Health and well-being:** looking at increasing people's sense of connection to nature
- **Employment:** showcasing training and employment routes in the nature and environment sector

Learning from the pilots fed into the development of the Birmingham Design Guide, which is part of the Local Development Framework and includes recommendations on landscape, green infrastructure and open space.

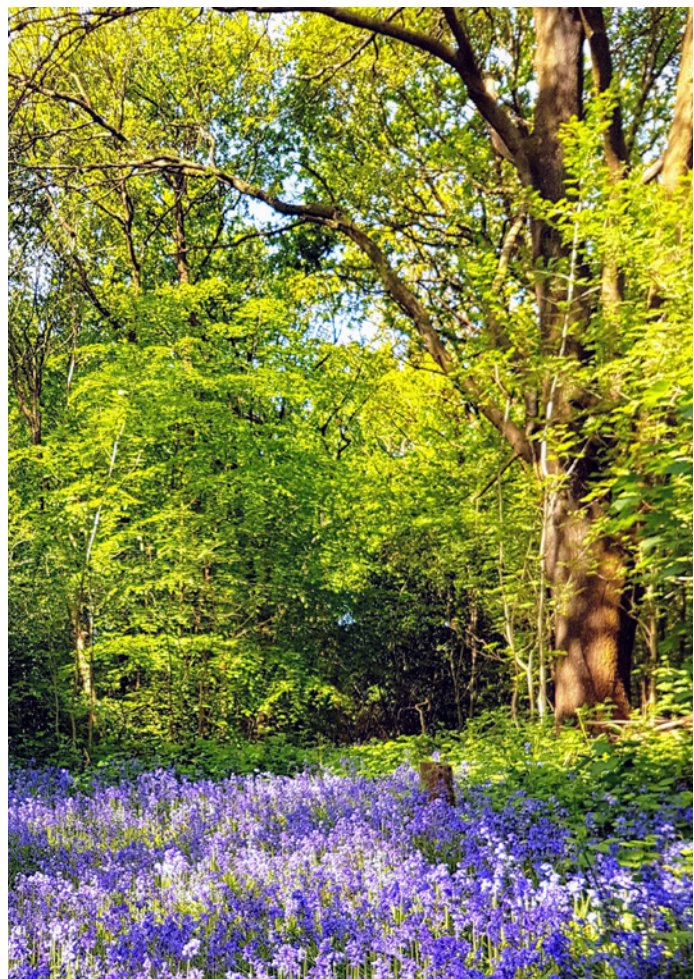
The next stage was the development of a long-term delivery plan that would see Birmingham recognised as a city of nature, where its parks and green spaces were sustainably managed. The 25-year City of Nature Plan was developed during 2021 and published in February 2022.

The City of Nature Plan covered a range of actions including: contribution to net zero, supporting health and wellbeing, equality of access, opportunities for green jobs and skills, community involvement, and the valuation of benefits from green and blue spaces.

A key part of the Plan was the development of a tool for assessing *environmental justice*. This identified the wards where compound issues were felt the most. There was a strong emphasis on planning for future climate change as well as indicators of deprivation and health inequality. Scoring took into account:

- access to green space
- flood risk
- urban heat island effect
- health inequalities
(through excess years of life lost)
- indices of multiple deprivation

Wards were given a red, amber or green status with the red wards showing those areas of the city where there was the least environmental justice. This provided a new baseline from which to develop an evidence-based approach to levelling up.



The City of Nature Plan also developed the Birmingham Fair Parks Standard to set a benchmark of quality for all BCC green spaces. This was based around five measures:

- **Fair:** is it welcoming, accessible, clean and safe?
- **Green:** are there different trees and plants, are there habitats for wildlife, is it managed sustainably?
- **Healthy:** are there walking routes, quiet areas, activities, is the park used for social prescriptions, and play value?
- **Involved:** can you find out what's happening in your park, can you influence what is happening?
- **Valued:** do we know the worth of what the park provides, is that shared, are there ways to raise extra funds?

The Plan committed to all public open spaces in all wards to reach the Birmingham Fair Standard, as well as the identification of 400 additional green spaces by the end of the plan period.

WHAT IS HAPPENING NOW?

The City of Nature Plan is now moving into the implementation phase, focusing on the delivery of the Birmingham Fair Parks Standard. Over the first 12 months (2022-23) this will be focused on five open spaces in Bordesley and Highgate Ward and supported by grant funding from the Birmingham City Council Commonwealth Games Legacy Fund and Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL).

The findings from this pilot will then be extended to another five wards in the city, focused on those areas that scored low in terms of environmental justice, as well as geographical neighbours, to make a central north-south spine of the city. This work will be supported by c.£500,000 allocated from the CIL across the next five years.

The Council has established the City of Nature Alliance to bring together community groups and organisations with an interest and role in delivering the City of Nature Plan.

BCC is also in the process of developing its approach to the implementation of biodiversity net gain as a tool for improving local green spaces. This will build on the approach to environmental injustice mapping set out in the City of Nature Plan. Birmingham will also be working with the local Wildlife Trust to develop a Local Nature Recovery Strategy.

SUCCESS FACTORS

- **The Naturally Birmingham project took a holistic approach**, with a number of council teams involved in the project, and pilots spanning covering a number of outcomes including early years education and skills / employment. It was led by the public health team with input from planning and operational teams responsible for working in parks. This enabled them to combine public health and environmental data to map environmental injustice across the city.
- **The Future Parks Accelerator helped fund a programme of work** that led to the development of the City of Nature 25 Year Plan. This has raised the profile and ambition for Birmingham's parks and green spaces through the Birmingham Fair Parks Standard.
- **The vision for Naturally Birmingham and City Nature Plan was not limited to parks and open spaces**, the learning and action areas spanned many areas including active travel and the street scape.

CONSTRAINTS

- **Staff capacity** was a limiting factor, particularly where the project needed to engage with other departments who were stretched already e.g., the early years team, the parks team and specialist skills such as GIS mapping.

LEARNING POINTS

- **Funding:** there is a shortage of long-term funding across the parks and open spaces sector. The Future Parks Accelerator Programme was key to supporting and generating Birmingham's City of Nature approach, funding a team of eight people for the main term of the project (2020-22). The implementation phase is being supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund and the local Community Infrastructure Levy.
- **Scale:** Birmingham is a large local authority area with a wide network of parks and open spaces and a need to prioritise investment. The city developed an innovative approach to mapping environmental injustice as well as its own benchmark for the quality of parks and green spaces to help it to do this. This echoed the approach recommended by Sir Michael Marmot of proportionate universalism, whereby investment is graduated to areas of greatest need.
- **Partnership working:** partnership work is essential to improve and develop green and blue spaces. Birmingham has formed the City of Nature Alliance to bring together the different community groups and organisations who will have a role in delivering the plan.

LINKS

Birmingham Our Future City: <https://www.birmingham.gov.uk/ourfuturecityplan>

Naturally Birmingham Future Parks Project: <https://naturallybirmingham.org/>

City of Nature Plan: <https://naturallybirmingham.org/birmingham-city-of-nature-delivery-framework/>

Birmingham City of Nature Alliance: <https://naturallybirmingham.org/birmingham-city-of-nature-alliance/>

Birmingham Design Guide:

https://www.birmingham.gov.uk/info/20054/local_plan_documents/1367/birmingham_design_guide

Future Parks Accelerator: <https://www.futureparks.org.uk/>

Environment Act 2021, HM Government: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2021/30/contents/enacted>

The Economics of Biodiversity: The Dasgupta Review (February 2021. HM Treasury:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/final-report-the-economics-of-biodiversity-the-dasgupta-review>

State of the environment: health, people and the environment (2021) Environment Agency:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/state-of-the-environment/state-of-the-environment-health-people-and-the-environment>

Health Equity in England: The Marmot Review 10 Years On (2020):

<https://www.health.org.uk/publications/reports/the-marmot-review-10-years-on>

Levelling Up the United Kingdom (Feb 2022), Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, via:

<http://www.gov.uk/official-documents>

During 2022, the Association of Directors of Environment, Economy, Planning & Transport led a project to explore how local authorities are levelling up through action to address disparities in multiple domains - public health, local environmental quality, exposure to climate risk and socio-economic deprivation.

This project was in collaboration with the Association of Directors of Adult Social Services, the Association of Directors of Public Health, the Association of Directors of Children's Services and the Local Government Association, recognising the synergies between our work areas, and the links between wellbeing and place.

This case study is one of a series of examples which look at how local authorities are levelling up, across service areas.

- ADEPT members are the place-making strategists and policy shapers across top tier local authority areas
- ADEPT members are specialists, delivering services and sharing best practice across key sectors including environment, planning, housing, transport and economy
- ADEPT members design strategies for the future, taking communities beyond 2035
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