The voice of our sustainable built environment

CONSULTATION RESPONSE: LAND USE CONSULTATION

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The UK Green Building Council represents the voice of the UK's sustainable built environment industry. We are a charity powered by more than 700 members from banks, large estate owners, housebuilders, and manufacturers to innovative startups, universities, local councils and government departments - all working to transform the built environment in the face of the climate, nature and cost-of-living crises.

QUESTION 11: What approaches could cost-effectively support nature and food production in urban landscapes and on land managed for recreation?

The five key goals of the fair land use transition laid out by this consultation include delivering new infrastructure and housing, and investing in long-term climate resilience. Urban land use is crucial to both of these goals: the vast majority of people in the UK live in cities, and protecting these major population centres from climate hazards while delivering new infrastructure and housing is crucial to maintaining living standards and safety in a heating climate.

A key way to support nature and deliver climate resilience is to integrate blue and green infrastructure (e.g. ponds and parks) in urban environments. These can deliver multiple benefits including enhanced biodiversity, flood mitigation, carbon sequestration, and improved public health. By integrating blue and green infrastructure into our urban environments we can protect people from hazards like the urban heat island effect and surface water flooding, while urban vegetation can also remove significant amounts of air pollution and provide essential habitats for local wildlife, thereby improving the quality of life for residents.

To enhance nature coverage in the urban environment, UKGBC advocates for targets in local plans to increase the area covered with trees, parks, open spaces, well-managed water features and absorbent natural 'spongy' surfaces rather than impermeable surfaces. This would help cut deadly air pollution and give a lifeline to nature. It also makes high streets and communities more pleasant, boosting both physical and mental health, and making them attractive for investment. Natural England's new Green Infrastructure Framework estimates that parks and

greenspaces in England deliver around £6.6 billion of health, climate, and environmental benefits every year.

Introducing a national requirement for local plans to achieve the 3:30:300 goal would help everyone feel the benefit whilst driving nationwide progress. This means 3 trees or nature features within sight of every home, 30% canopy or green cover in each neighbourhood, and everyone living no more than 300 metres from a biodiverse park or green space. This should be complemented with targets to limit the urban heat island effect to give strategic direction to local plans. The Urban Greening Factor approach, successfully adopted by the Greater London Authority, can be used to assess planning proposals and track progress. This will require national government funding and capacity building for local authorities.

An important urban design concept is the "sponge city". In terms of delivery, this looks similar to the policy recommendation to integrate blue and green infrastructure, but the idea of increasing absorbent areas of nature and reducing impermeable surfaces can be a helpful way to think about how we can avoid surface water flooding in urban environments. The sponge city idea focuses on capturing, storing, and gradually releasing rainwater through natural processes rather than rapidly discharging it into overburdened sewer systems. This not only reduces flood risk but also replenishes groundwater supplies. Around the world sponge city pilots have replaced conventional grey infrastructure with wetlands, permeable pavements, and green roofs, demonstrating substantial cost savings and improved urban resilience. Similar approaches are now being explored in cities across the world—including in parts of the UK—to address our increasingly storm-prone climate. This is something that the government should consider when weighing up the benefits of nature in urban landscapes.

Expanding food growing in urban and peri-urban areas is a practical way to support nature, improve food security, and build social resilience. Increasing the number of allotments and community gardens can enhance local biodiversity and provide spaces for food education, skills training, and community engagement. Government should provide support for Local Authorities on providing these, and targets should be set for allotment access. Integrating food production into existing green infrastructure (such as parks, school grounds, and brownfield sites) helps offset the ongoing loss of agricultural land and ensures that development supports people and nature alike.

Planning policies should include clear targets for safeguarding and creating spaces for urban food production. A spatial approach to urban greening, such as London's Green Link Walk, can increase access to nature and deliver co-benefits like improved physical and mental health. Strategic initiatives such as Transport for London's London Leisure Walking Plan show how green corridors can restore nature and connect communities, especially in areas where access to green space is limited. Embedding food production within wider green and blue infrastructure strategies, and ensuring they are supported by national funding and local authority capacity, will help cities deliver cost-effective improvements in biodiversity, climate resilience, and quality of life.

In conclusion, there are huge benefits to supporting nature and food production in urban landscapes, in terms of increased quality of life and climate resilience. To reap these benefits the government should invest in Local Authority capacity, and local plans should include clear targets to increase blue and green infrastructure.