



## opinion

**POLLY TURTON**

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# What are you getting for your money?

Figures from the National Audit Office's recent report *Enhancing urban green space* (see *News*, page 4), suggest that the historical decline in the quality of urban green spaces in England has in many areas been reversed. Eighty-four per cent of green space managers believed that the quality of their green spaces is improving or stable, compared to 44 per cent in 2000, while 83 per cent of them felt that the work of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister and CABE Space had contributed to the greater priority given to urban green spaces over the last few years, and the amount of capital investment that has gone into them.

However, as highlighted in my recent article in *Green Places* (GP22, *Forum*, p14), this capital investment needs to be sustained and backed up by sustainable long-term sources of revenue funding, in order for these improvements in quality to last and add real value to urban environments, economies and communities.

Against this backdrop of calls for more resources for green spaces, CABE Space set out to establish whether simply providing more funding would automatically improve green space quality. We wanted to understand how local authorities spend their resources in relation to parks and green spaces



and the impact of this expenditure on the quality of those spaces. The results of our research, summarised in *Urban parks: do you know what you're getting for your money?* (above) were surprising. Although only eight local authorities were examined, a strong theme emerged. Most of them didn't have comprehensive figures showing how much they were spending on their parks and few had a clear idea of what quality they were trying to achieve.

Without this information it is impossible for local authorities to take a strategic approach to improving the quality of the service delivered to local people.

It's impossible to know if the service is run efficiently or whether the public money spent on the service is well spent. It also suggests that parks and green space – valuable public assets – are not being managed to increase public value.

In order to make the case for more capital investment, as well as securing vital revenue funding, local authorities need to be able to provide robust information about what they're spending on their parks service and the quality achieved as a result of that expenditure. Only then will it be possible to say what impact a reduction or increase in funding will have on the quality of their parks. Our findings are backed up by those of the NAO report and we want to know if these results are reflected nationally and, if so, what steps CABE Space and ODPM can take to address the issues.

The CABE Space report aims to be the start of a dialogue with local authorities and others in the green space sector, and we'd like to hear from you.

*To contribute to the debate:*

*Visit: [www.cabe.org.uk/urbanparks](http://www.cabe.org.uk/urbanparks) or*

*Email: [publicspace@cabe.org.uk](mailto:publicspace@cabe.org.uk)*



## column

**CHRIS BAINES**

A writer, broadcaster, and environmental campaigner, Baines is a trustee of the Waterways Trust; an advisor to CABE Space; and was, until recently, a trustee of the Heritage Lottery Fund

# Landscapes in limbo

When I was seven, my favourite landscape was 'the hills and mountains'. This was a scruffy patch of fly-tipped land between my home and school where I built dens, found hidden treasure, gathered blackberries and sought out nests of hedge sparrows and blackbirds. By the time I was ten, my hills and mountains had become a housing estate.

It is in the nature of our crowded landscape that it changes. In urban and suburban areas a patch of ground may be transformed from buildings to a pile of rubble in an afternoon. It may then lie idle for a month, a year, even a decade or two – and then resume respectable use as a new built development.

These limbo landscapes are important and we need to take them much more seriously.

As a seven year old I had no difficulty recognising the special qualities of my own interim landscape, and nature responds in much the same way. After a single settled spring, disturbed ground may yield colourful poppies from long-dormant seeds. One summer is usually long enough to capture windborne seeds of pioneer species such as groundsel, thistle and goat willow. Within a year the kinds of birds and insects that struggle to survive in farming countryside are likely to appear, and interim urban landscapes have become the salvation of species such as

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goldfinches and burnet moths. They thrive in landscapes that are bouncing back.

There are a few celebrated urban landscapes that remained in limbo long enough to grow into protected treasures. Birch woodlands have colonised many redundant railway shunting yards, to the delight of willow warblers and infant warriors alike. Land settlement and leaking waterways have combined to form new wetland habitats that support rare birds, insects and amphibians.

Interim landscapes are not all roses. While it is true that management by denial and neglect does sometimes yield spectacular success, it can also deliver massive disappointment. These are the landscapes of burned-out cars, unlicensed dumping and parental paranoia (what chance of exploring the 'hills and mountains' as a modern route to school?). So it is

not sufficient to rely on casual neglect and happy accidents. There is a need to find far better ways to celebrate the special short-life qualities of limbo landscapes.

The answer is partly ecological – we need to improve our skills in working with dynamic, natural processes. We also need to recognise the added value that can come from gentle intervention. Junk-sculptors in residence, play leadership schemes, community gardens growing local food crops, archaeological digs, seasonal ponds as flash floodwater storage, green-waste composting: there are plenty of possibilities for positive short-term use.

Our temporarily vacant brown-field land is already highly valued in the world of casual play and nature conservation. It could contribute so much more to quality of life in urban areas.