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Written evidence submitted by Dr Francis Gilbert, Goldsmiths, University of London (UGS0025)

Response to call for evidence
Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

Inquiry: Urban Green Spaces

Submitted by:
Dr Francis Gilbert, Senior Lecturer at the Department for Educational Studies,
Goldsmiths, University of London

[19/10/2023]

I am a Senior Lecturer in Educational Studies at Goldsmiths, and have published widely on teaching, working with young people, and the environment. In 2021, I gained funding from the British Academy and Goldsmiths to help young people become co-researchers into their local parks in Lewisham and Southwark by using creative research strategies. We have found during the succeeding years that this research approach is particularly effective; this written evidence submission explains more. Before becoming a lecturer at Goldsmiths in 2015, I was a schoolteacher who was involved in a number of ecological projects with the schools I worked in.

Please find out more about me, and my publications here:

<https://www.gold.ac.uk/educational-studies/staff/gilbert/>

Executive summary

1. Young people and community groups can make a significant contribution to the improvement of green spaces and should be involved in consultation in their development.
 2. Creative research strategies are particularly good at getting young people to research their local green spaces.
 3. Encouraging young people to write poems, make art, films and advocate to the relevant stakeholders for their green spaces, has a powerful impact: councillors, parks' management, park user groups, health organisations, community groups all listen and work with young people to improve these spaces and develop new ones.
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1. How successfully are the Government and Local Authorities protecting and increasing urban green spaces, and what trends can be seen in the extent and quality of those spaces?
 4. In the case of the green spaces near Goldsmiths, there are a number of threats: the need for housing, creeping privatisation of space, climate change, air pollution, overcrowding, lack of safety, environmental degradation from things like littering/pollution all are significant

threats. Nevertheless, some councils deal with these challenges quite effectively. For example, the London Borough of Lewisham, the borough in which Goldsmiths is situated, has won 16 Green Flag Awards in 2022-23. This indicates a high level of care for parks. Effective curation of parks means that more trees are planted to oxygenate the air, and plants which are resilient to the effects of climate change are planted.

5. This said, lack of proper funding and incentives to be ecological in approach do mean many parks in urban spaces are under threat. During the research we conducted with local school children in Southwark and Lewisham (Gilbert 2022), we found that litter was the biggest threat to the ecologies of the parks we studied and also the ways in which they were managed, with the parks we investigated being regularly mown, giving little space and time for wildlife to flourish (Gilbert 2022b). The young people who became our co-researchers wanted to feel safer in the parks, requesting more and better lighting, more play facilities, more wildlife and vegetable gardens which they could interact with (ibid).

2. What environmental challenges are urban areas facing, and how could wider access and inclusion to green spaces (including dog-friendly spaces) address these challenges?

6. The parks near Goldsmiths are facing considerable environmental challenges. Pollution from cars is very significant, and the air quality in and around Goldsmiths, and its nearby parks is poor (Lewisham Council 2023).

7. The young people who worked with us on our project (which amounted to nearly a hundred school children aged 8-16 years across two schools) all wanted to live and breathe in better quality air. Many of them believed that more trees in their local parks would help with oxygenating the air.

8. Above all, the young people wanted to feel more included in the ways in which their parks and green spaces were managed. They reported that they found making films, writing and performing poetry about their parks helped them to connect with them better, and helped them research their parks (Gilbert 2022b). When local councillors, parks' management, park user groups, local community health groups listened to their poetry and watched their films about their local parks, they all listened carefully and acted upon the young people's wishes about their local parks. This led to the parks being improved in different ways. For example, in one park, a water fountain was installed, better lighting set up, and a wildlife garden instituted (Gilbert 2023a). Our research suggests that young people need to be given the space and time and resources to interact mindfully with their local parks, to walk around them, talk about them, and create art about them. This builds a sense of connection with these green spaces. They no longer see parks as separate from them, but part of them and their community (Gilbert 2023b). As a result of their research, the young people found out that their parks are actually much safer than they feel, particularly at night; they learnt that much of the biodiversity in their local parks is under threat.

3. To what extent will Government initiatives such as the Green Infrastructure Framework, the levelling up parks fund and urban tree challenge fund

adequately address the issues associated with a lack of green space in towns and cities?

9. These initiatives are welcome, and certainly have improved things, but our research indicates that young people need to be involved in them. We are now working the young mayor's team in Lewisham and we feel that these initiatives could be more closely tied to their work. Our research indicates that consultation needs to be creative and engaging. Young people respond more readily to initiatives if they feel empowered and are able to express themselves creatively in terms of making films, pictures, poems around a particular issue as a first step to understanding the situation they are dealing with. Our research showed this very strongly. The creative arts are not just pretty 'add-ons' but can be used as powerful tools in shaping policy (Gilbert 2022b).

4. Will the Government achieve its aims to increase the amount of green cover to 40% in urban residential areas? What other additional measures should the Government take to increase green urban space?

10. As has been stressed, involving young people in the process of managing, developing and shaping green spaces should be a priority. Providing resources for community groups and young people to work with resources like our Parklife Toolkit (2023b) (which outlines how creative research might be carried out into a local park by anybody which would then lead to positive change) would really help make local residents get what they want.

5. Is access to urban green spaces equally distributed across all sectors of society? Do the environmental and associated health risks disproportionately impact certain groups? What barriers to access exist and how can they be addressed?

11. Our parks have a problem with young people. While English parks – and many worldwide -- cater for children aged 0-8 years with playgrounds, they too frequently make older children feel unwelcome and unwanted, particularly young people from poorer backgrounds. This is because young people struggle to find their own spaces and activities in them, and often feel they are unfairly blamed for things like anti-social behaviour (Aalst & Brands: 2021: Brown 2013). The privatisation of park spaces has led to them feeling victimised by various authorities (such as security guards, park wardens and the police) and excluded from parks, even though parks are one of the few places they can come together in groups. While small minorities, such as skateboarders, might be provided for in terms of activities, most young people have few activities open to them, and little power to say what they want from their parks (Brown 2013).

12. Yet research shows that parks can significantly help young people's health (Day & Wager 2010: Steletenrich 2015: Neal et al 2015: Rigolon 2017). It's clear that getting these young people involved in researching their local park and changing it for the better could lead to significant impacts for them and other young people, which might include:

- Improving the vegetation in the park which can lead to improved air quality: the community garden and other possible rewilding projects could do this (Pugh et al, 2012)

- Offering a ‘reprieve from noise’ and new ‘blue spaces’ such as bodies of water (Bray et al, 2022)
- Cognitive benefits which come from being regularly in green spaces (Berman et al, 2008)
- Improving vision which comes from spending more time outdoors
- Improved socialization which comes from socializing in the park
- Improved physical activity (Veitch et al, 2021)
- (Summary of Steletenrich 2015: 256)

13. The barriers that exist to enacting positive change are in part due to a few things: time, resources and education. Our research shows when relatively small sums of money are used to get academics, university students and school children working together on researching their local parks in creative ways, this leads to a win-win situation whereby young people feel their voices are being heard. Academics and schools can connect young people with the people in power in their local communities connected with parks: parks’ management, park user groups, local community health groups, local councillors, members of parliament. When these groups listen to the young people’s poems, watch their films, see their art, learn about their research into the local parks, this leads to positive change and a sense of urgency to change things.

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