

**STRATEGY UNIT**  
**“COMMUNITIES PROJECT”**

*Questions on Public Space and Quality of Life*

**For NCRA Panel**

**Notes from Martin Crookston**  
**Director, Tribal - Urban Studio**  
(formerly known as Llewelyn-Davies Planning)

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### *Questions on Public Space and Quality of Life*

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*Exam question 1 - What impact does public space have on communities and what are the characteristics that make public space good or bad (including what we can learn from international experience and areas of best practice)?*

1. I'll start with a taxonomy of spaces and their uses. I draw heavily on two pieces of work I was involved in Open Space Planning in London (1992 for the London Planners LPAC, and then DoE), and the thematic report which was part of the “State of the English Cities” suite Liveability on English Cities (2006 for then ODPM). Also some research by CABE and CABE Space.
2. Categorisation is generally into a **hierarchy** along the lines of:
  - Regional / Metropolitan Parks (say 60 hectares & above, catchment up to 8km away, often including sizeable woodland or heath, active and passive recreation)
  - District Parks (about 20 ha., catchment generally within 1-2 km but may be up to up to say 5km, landscape setting with wide range of activities)
  - Local Parks (2 ha., approx 400m catchment, landscaped areas, children’s play, possibly playing field)
  - small local open spaces and parks (often smaller / “single-purpose” - gardens, sitting-out areas, playgrounds, similar catchment to Local Park; plus
  - linear open spaces (towpaths, Tk of Old Rly, etc).
3. **Uses**, and nature of value to community, will clearly vary across this range. The standard division is between “active” and “passive” recreation. Active / sports use accounts for generally less than a fifth, and often less than a tenth, of people’s park use: “passive” use in the sense of sitting, walking, and informal play is predominant. Users mainly visit in mixed groups of children and adults; the majority of users are 15 or under; women users seem more likely to use the small and medium parks.
4. **Roles**: but we can also distinguish between Recreational & Non-recreational uses and roles. Open space is not only used for recreation

– whether active like football, or passive like strolling or sitting. Our report for LPAC explored the wider contribution that open space makes to the community and the quality of life. It distinguished:

- an Amenity role: the value of open space as part of what people appreciate about their area. This depends on how much of it there is, whether or not it is visible, its psychological “meaning”, and – in regeneration areas – its ability to contribute to investment and uplift. That this role is reflected in financial value is evident: both our LPAC study, and work for CABI Space more recently, point to park proximity commanding a premium in house prices and rents: estimated as in the region of 5-7%.
  - an Ecological role: nature conservation is always part of the role an open space plays, though the extent and ecological significance clearly varies greatly. What is important here, though, is that this supports a desire amongst the general public (not just specialists), recorded in research, for people to experience nature in their daily life.
  - Educational: connected with this is the “outdoor classroom” role. In our survey, all schools made use of the outdoors for educational purposes; though off-site visits might be only twice a term or even once a year. Primary, nursery and special schools used the outdoors most, and for play and fun as well as study. Again, this demonstrates the importance of the local and small scale.
  - A Cultural role was also identified. As well as well-known activities like (in London’s case) concerts at Crystal Palace or Kenwood, parks and open spaces host a wide range of community and cultural events: less high-profile, but often very important to the local communities, and so an important use of open space. Fairs, community festivals, charity fund-raisers, children’s / youth events: all fall into this category.
  - Social: the opportunity for social interaction - not just organised events - is clearly a vital community role of open space. Our London study used interviews, observation and discussion with community groups to establish that: people come in groups; they come to use social facilities (where these exist); they explicitly say they have come to socialise. The social role is interwoven with other uses - such as children’s play - but it is definitely distinct. The parks are an important part of the social fabric of a city: its heart, not just its “lungs”.
5. So far this has mainly been about green space. There is also a very important aspect to do with the **public realm** in the sense of other public spaces which are not parks: whether hard-surfaced public squares or other “spaces between buildings”: streets, corners, wide pavements.... Studies by Jan Gehl and by CABI show that high-

quality public spaces result in an increase in public life, help encourage more intensive use of space, and are felt by people to do so. Many of the considerations outlined above in relation to green space explain how this works – but it is often difficult to get those involved in the creation, management or modification of non-park spaces to think of them in this way.

Major public squares are the easiest to apply this thinking to, and many have indeed been recaptured for their public realm role from traffic, or from lack of TLC, in recent years (Piccadilly Gardens, Manchester; Broad Street / Centenary Square, Birmingham, Sheffield Peace Garden, and so on). They offer renewed focus and civic confidence at the heart of the city.

Smaller and more “incidental” spaces are much more problematic: and yet in some localities may offer real potential to add to the public space available to the community. It is however a distinctive feature of British cities that the potential social roles, pedestrian desire lines or human scale are given very little weight in (re-)design, as against the needs of traffic flow, barrier-driven safety approaches, or cheap low-quality solutions. Examples include street junctions where potential meeting- and sitting- space is ignored; roundabouts where traffic lights have now had to be put in so you might as well never have bothered with the demolition needed to lay out the roundabout in the first place; crudely tarmacked “space left over after planning”. The external environment is thus working *against* social interaction, at least at the level of the immediate locality, rather than in favour of it.

6. “Communities” has generally been used loosely in this note, and I don’t propose to try any definitions. The only point worth specific mention in this context (of open space and the public realm) is community in the sense of area served. The community or **catchment** served by each of the spaces outlined above obviously varies, and in the case of the bigger parks it is not only serving a walk-in catchment: people will be going in cars or on the bus. Even where it is walk-in, the real catchment will not be a magic 400-meter circle, but a product of access routes, visibility and “feel”.
7. **Quantity and quality:** historically planners were obsessed by the standards given by the National Playing Fields Association. This recreationally-oriented benchmark ((the “6-acre standard”, meaning 2.43 ha. of outdoor playing space per 1000 population) is acknowledged to be impossible to achieve in most urban areas. But the whole notion of the amount of open space needs to be regarded anyway as only part of the community’s requirement. Our London study stressed how important quality is, compared with quantity: visual, landscape, facilities, feeling safe, maintenance. And examples are numerous like that in Hull, where consultees in West Hull told our team that they didn’t use West Park, but crossed the city to use East Park, because it was better.

8. On **international** practice and experience, it's important to retain a sense of proportion. Britain has some of the best urban parks, and open space practice, in the world. High-design new parks like Parc Andre Citroen (Paris) attract landscape architects; but across the city Bercy is a much better integration of new housing and new park - and in a city which historically has had far fewer, and far less varied, green spaces than London, Newcastle or Edinburgh. What continental cities (Prague, Aix, Barcelona...) are worth visiting for in this connection is the handling of the rest of the public realm: the smaller hard-surface areas which form attractive "placettes", urban squares and spaces between buildings.
9. **Good practice** examples in this country can draw on experience of a different kind: good management, responsiveness to what the public tell councils, and careful monitoring linked back to practice. Manchester and Leicester, the two case study cities in our "State of the Cities" work, are interesting in this regard. Southwark's integration of public realm and municipal management might also be worth a visit.

*Exam question 2 - What are the main factors driving quality of life, how stable have these been over time, and to what extent can government influence them?*

1. Starting with **definitions** and distinctions again, and assuming that we are in the realm of quality of life as relevant to urban policy (rather than say size of pay-packet, or number of en-suite bedrooms):
  - Quality of Life has been defined as "a feeling of well-being, fulfilment, or satisfaction on the part of residents or visitors to a place" (Andrews)
  - and Quality of Place as "the sum of those factors - culture, local environment, public realm, housing, community safety, access, health - which together make somewhere - whether a town a city or a region - an attractive place to live" (Yorkshire Forward RDA)
  - Liveability: "the day-to-day issues that affect people's quality of life at a local level" (Carmona / UCL The Bartlett, for ODPM). So this looks like a reasonable area of exploration for the role of quality of life in relation to "communities".
2. We divided **Liveability** (in our State of the Cities theme report, Table 2.1) into four elements:
  - Environmental quality: noisier / quieter? dirtier / cleaner? more or less congested? housing quality better or worse?

- Place quality (physical): quality of the built environment “product”; levels of derelict land; quality of parks & green space; public realm quality
  - Place quality (functional): pedestrian journeys - easier / harder? public transport quality; vitality & viability of services
  - Safer Places: crime levels; anti-social behaviour
3. **Stability over time?** Our report offered a cautious yes to the question as to whether English cities are becoming more or less “liveable” – on most indicators; though not on all counts, and the evidence base is often very thin. The study’s summary table has two indicators worsening over the last decade (noisier; congestion worse); six improving (cleaner; housing quality; derelict land; parks; local services; crime); with five either probably static (public transport quality; quality of built environment) or lacking data to the extent that even a broad-brush conclusion was impossible (public realm; pedestrian journeys; ASB).
4. **Government influence** (“What is to be done?”, in the immortal words of Comrade V. I. Ulyanov). The study’s research and case-studies suggest:
- that good urban management can make a difference to many of these variables
  - that the better councils have demonstrated process innovations which made a difference
  - that Government monitoring of, and support for, local authority performance can, with the right indicators, help to encourage and achieve this
  - that there’s a case for more support, including for indicators which would allow better monitoring at local level. The BV indicators are far from perfect; but they, and their use in the central/local dialogue, are an important start.
5. Some responses are probably a matter of **national policy**: emissions; bus regulation / franchising / subsidy; policing focussed on local “perceived quality” outcomes.
6. Some are about improved design - for safety, activity, quality, to smooth pedestrian journeys, etc. – and also about improved **processes for design** / approval / intervention, which bring key disciplines together to improve not just the new-build but also the existing built environment and urban spaces.

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