

Green Communities and the Journey to Net Zero

A discussion paper

July 2021

Findings of the first Green Communities
Summit of housing association and
sustainability leaders

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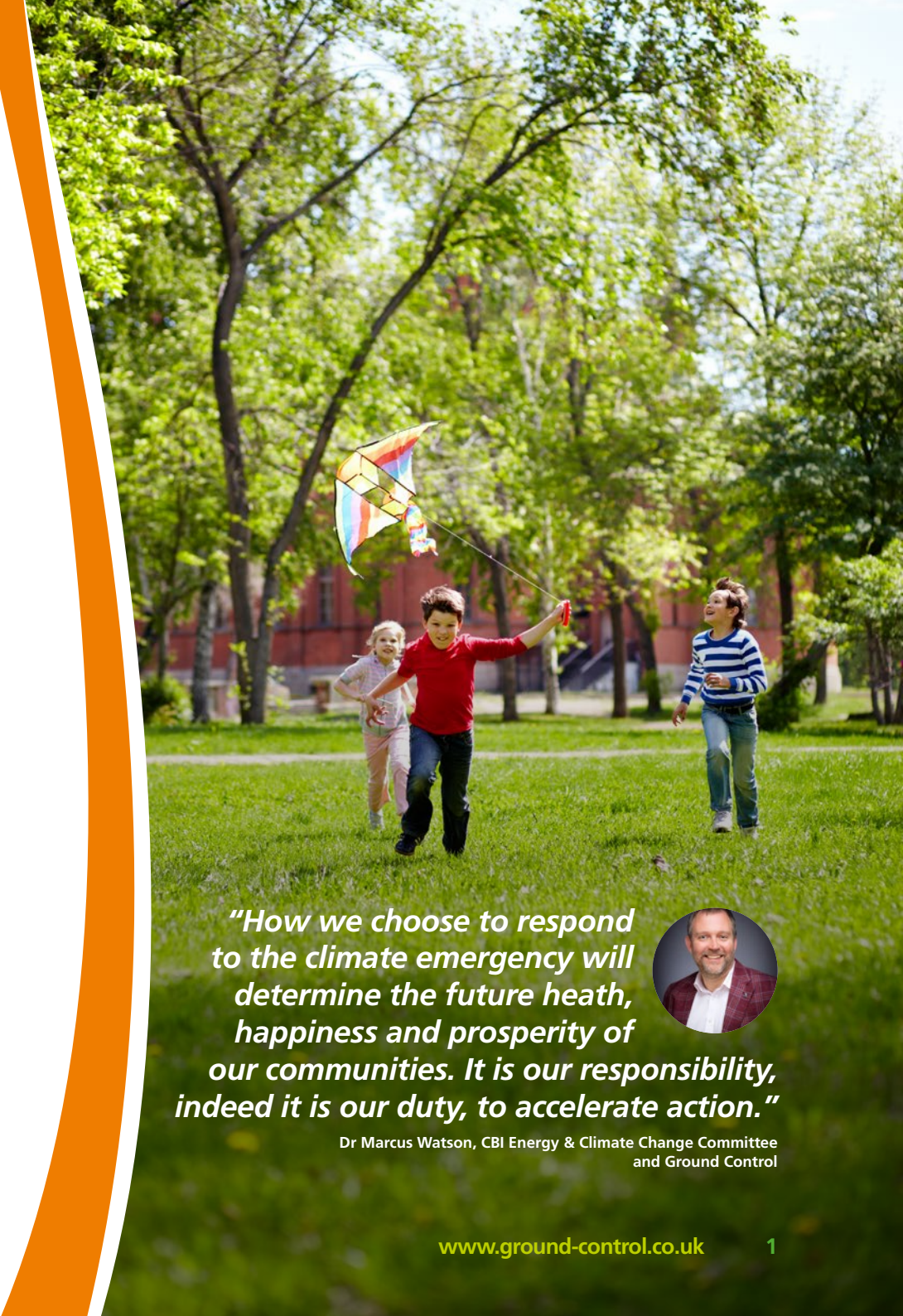
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Context and Acknowledgements

This discussion paper aims to explore the added value a 'green community' approach can bring to social landlords and their customers. It builds on insights shared by Dr Marcus Watson (Ground Control), Lord Bob Kerslake (Peabody), Nusheen Hussain (Home Group and Green Futures Partnership) and David Godfrey (Thames Estuary Growth Board), as well as reports including [Natural Capital for Biodiversity Policy: What, Why and How](#), a narrative published by Capitals Coalition, to develop thinking around green assets and the role outside space will play in the social housing sector's journey to net zero.

The paper could not be written without the valuable input of Green Communities Summit participants, including Southern Housing Group, South Yorkshire HA, Metropolitan Thames Valley, Yorkshire HA, Notting Hill Genesis, Alliance Homes, Forviva, North Star, Nottingham City Homes, Clarion, and Southlake Housing.

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“How we choose to respond to the climate emergency will determine the future health, happiness and prosperity of our communities. It is our responsibility, indeed it is our duty, to accelerate action.”



Dr Marcus Watson, CBI Energy & Climate Change Committee and Ground Control

Executive Summary

Our natural environment is at risk. Without action, the planet is on track to warm by almost 3 degrees Celsius by 2100 - double the rate that scientists have identified as needed to constrain the worst impacts of climate change - rendering the planet inhospitable, too hot to grow food, and resulting in the displacement of millions of people.

In response, the UK Government declared a climate and environment emergency and published its [25 Year Environment Plan](#) - sending a clear message that nothing short of transformational change is needed to reverse the loss of biodiversity and ensure the next generation can reap the benefits of a thriving natural world.

In its [Energy Whitepaper](#) government set ambitious targets for the housing sector, requiring that all social homes have an energy performance certificate (EPC) rating of C by 2035 (where possible) and that from next year, all new homes reduce carbon emissions by 31%.

“Climate change has a catastrophic effect on biodiversity and without biodiversity, there is no future for humanity.”

David Macdonald, Professor of Wildlife Conservation, Oxford University

Targets around energy efficiency will get the housing sector a long way to meeting the net zero challenge, but not the whole way.

To unlock net zero by 2050, Housing Association leaders agree they need to look beyond housing stock and energy efficient homes, to the creation of sustainable green communities that enhance biodiversity, reverse nature loss, and enable social landlords to become part of the answer to arrest the climate emergency.

This is recognised in the Environment Bill which will create powerful new laws to protect and enhance the environment. The Bill sets out the following key components to mandatory biodiversity net gains, likely to become law in 2023:

- minimum 10% gain required calculated using Biodiversity Metric & approval of net gain plan
- habitat secured for at least 30 years via obligations/conservation covenant
- habitat can be delivered on-site, off-site or via statutory biodiversity credits.

Ultimately, this discussion paper reports on the key themes identified by housing association leaders during the first Green Communities Summit (6th July 2021). The insights outlined in this paper will help social housing landlords understand the holistic value a green community approach can bring and develop thinking around how green assets can help deliver net zero by 2050.



“When you ask yourself, what can we do, remember housing associations have enormous potential to contribute on the open space, health and biodiversity agendas. It is part of who we are and our stewardship role.”

Lord Kerslake, Peabody



“Climate change is the next biggest challenge for social landlords, both in terms of resource and investment required. It will impact every area of our sector. However, it is also one of the greatest opportunities we have to make a meaningful difference.”

Nusheen Hussain, Home Group and Green Futures Partnership



“The Government’s 25-year Environment Plan identifies the need to place environment and biodiversity at the heart of planning and development to create better spaces for people to live and work. We all need to work together to make a reality of this.”

David Godfrey, Thames Estuary Growth Board



"When it comes to the sustainability agenda housing stock is front and centre for housing associations, but we also have vast areas of open space and trees we can bring to bear. That makes us well placed as a sector to improve biodiversity and promote carbon capture."

Lord Kerslake, Peabody



"As social landlords we are well placed to contribute significantly to our customers, as well as the wider communities and the green economy."

Nusheen Hussain, Homes Group and Green Futures Partnership



"A 'green communities' approach frames the value of nature within the context of climate change, placemaking and resident wellbeing. This empowers housing association partners to integrate the value of nature into strategic decision-making."

Sam Jones, Ground Control

Active Stewardship

Housing associations are perfectly placed to take a holistic approach to building and green space stewardship.

Industry leaders agree, action needs to be accelerated to 'green' communities and identified five immediate ways the sector can maximise the benefits of sustainable open spaces for customers, communities and society as a whole:

- use its influence and power to create a blueprint for how natural systems can change lives for the better
- develop a long term open space strategy which prioritises green space as being equally important as buildings
- consider the powerful resources already available to capitalise on including, parkland, woods, green spaces, verges, scrubland, lakes and canals
- focus on quality open spaces, whatever the size of the space
- invest in what's needed to enable people to engage with the outdoors and enhance biodiversity.

Behavioural Change

Housing associations are well placed to support their residents to engage with environmental sustainability and biodiversity enhancement.

Industry leaders agree, many customers are yet to understand what net zero means or the benefit sustainable green spaces would bring. The following five key learnings were identified as being of value:

- understand customer aspirations in tandem with the requirement of wildlife and ecosystem
- where possible ensure early community involvement in the design and planning phase
- create customer awareness of what wider societal benefits green spaces can offer
- facilitate conversation with and between residents and develop local partnerships
- utilise community sustainability projects, such as community tree planting, as a route to identify 'green ambassadors'.

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“We must consider green placemaking and biodiversity enhancement holistically, considering customer aspirations, inclusivity, accessibility, health & safety and ongoing maintenance, all in tandem when we’re designing these spaces.”

Nusheen Hussain, Home Group and Green Futures Partnership

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“Green spaces are a life support system for the community. Sovereign Housing’s Lockdown Woods is a perfect example of the wider societal benefits that can be gained from a green communities approach. As it matures, the woodland will help reduce the housing association’s carbon footprint and become a wellbeing haven for the community.”

Sam Jones, Ground Control



"We acknowledged the role our green spaces will play, whether it's improving connectivity so people can walk, run and cycle between different neighbourhoods (which in turn has positive effects on people's health and wellbeing), or addressing climate change."

Lord Kerslake, Peabody



"We know that 10% of social housing will never be sustainable enough to make it to net zero. As social landlords we will have to look at innovative ways to use existing green assets to create carbon offsetting and biodiversity enhancement opportunities in the green spaces we manage."

Nusheen Hussain, Home Group and Green Futures Partnership



"Back in 2019 Ground Control created Little Cowbridge Wood in Billericay. The green gains on this pilot site already look incredibly promising, including the planting of 9 hectares of multi-function native broadleaf woodland, meadow restoration, orchard planting, introduction of bees and the generation of 11kW of wind, 50Kw of solar power and 80kWh of battery storage."

Sam Jones, Ground Control

Green Assets

Housing associations are stewards to vast amounts of open space. The potential to maximise existing green assets is immense and, as yet, untapped.

75% of participants at the Green Communities Summit agree, they do not yet feel equipped to utilise green spaces on the net zero journey. The following six measures were identified as actionable learnings to empower social landlords to 'green' communities:

- identity the 'secret garden' - pockets of underutilised land with the potential to become high quality green space
- consider habitat creation and maintenance, explore how maintenance regimes could adapt to enhance habitats
- innovate through creative landscape usage, expand societal value with outdoor classroom, environmental skills workshops and food growing and production
- take into account that green infrastructure provides an extraordinary rate of return: for example, Peabody shares that £100 million in capital costs and thirty year operating and maintenance costs generate benefits worth £850 million to the people of Thamesmead
- aim to make sure that each decision about new green programmes, operations and services is evidenced by a sound business and social value case
- carry out a green asset audit, catalogue outdoor spaces by function, location, size, and use.

Measuring Success

Housing Associations have access to an abundance of data. The Green Futures Partnership is leading work within the sector to improve the way that data is used to understand the net zero journey.

However, industry leaders agree, to accelerate the pace of change and reverse nature's decline it is vital that the housing sector has access to a single, credible measure for sustainable green placemaking that goes far beyond habitat creation to include wider biodiversity and sustainability value enhancements.

The following six learnings were identified as current best practice:

- don't wait for your data to be perfect, you will have enough to make good judgements on carbon reduction and biodiversity enhancement actions
- look at green assets with the same level of scrutiny as property data
- consider a wide range of holistic green space measurement factors including, improved air quality, reduction in temperature in densely populated urban areas, better water management, reduction in anti-social behaviour, health, wellbeing and biodiversity
- use Natural England's Biodiversity Metric 3.0 as a starting point to measure and account for nature losses and gains and get closer to a 10%+ biodiversity net gain on new residential development sites
- be informed by the Greener Futures Partnership approach, as members use amalgamated data for customers homes and green assets to inform plans
- identify opportunities to develop practical, measurable approaches with the support of a robust supplier network.



"Peabody's Green Infrastructure Framework, which captures our strategic approach to managing and utilising the unique blue and green spaces of Thamesmead, demonstrates the value of quality data. This approach has helped us to identify the many benefits and the beneficiaries from investment in green infrastructure. We know that time spent in green space significantly improves quality of life: as little as 15 minutes in green space just four times a week is worth at least £900 a year to each user in terms of wellbeing."

Lord Kerslake, Peabody



"Our aim is to continue work with Cambridge University's Institute for Sustainable Leadership to develop science-based, verifiable measures which will inform green community planning, and help housing association partners make informed decisions around habitat creation, biodiversity net gain and carbon sequestration."

Sam Jones, Ground Control



"We should look at our green assets and catalogue them by function, location, size and use. This will help us to develop a set of holistic data measurements that take into account carbon capture and customer health and wellbeing."

Nusheen Hussain, Home Group and Green Futures Partnership

Green Gains to Action

Transformative change does not happen overnight. However, there are some practical, proven steps - borne from Ground Control's unique perspective, knowledge of the environment and carbon reduction - that housing association partners can action immediately:

- use your purchasing power to change to renewable energy suppliers at no additional cost (leverage 'refer a friend' schemes)
- change your vehicle policy. It can now be cheaper to use electric fleets
- explore where you may be able to undertake low-cost biodiversity activities such as rewilding areas of unused space or repurposing manmade materials to form wildlife habitats
- foster a community of 'green ambassadors' through tree planting and biodiversity projects on any space not walked on
- involve local residents with projects designed to increase engagement with nature and cultivate a sense of green space ownership this includes, wildlife recording, information boards, newsletters, opportunities to volunteer and resident wildlife groups
- invite your supply chain to share their activities to maximise opportunities.



"Change is always difficult to manage and that is why tailored awareness training is key. It shouldn't be costly either, all good contractors should provide this as part of their own commitments to social value."

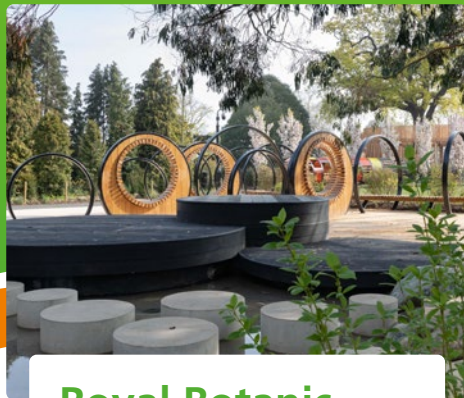
Sam Jones, Ground Control



Leaving a Sustainable Legacy

At Ground Control, we're helping public and private sector landowners to maximise green gains - pioneering environmental programmes that enhance biodiversity, reverse nature loss, and support the journey to net zero.

From eco-conscious green placemaking to reducing emissions through sustainable grounds maintenance, we are playing our part in making housing associations part of the answer to arrest the climate emergency.



Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew

We delivered an ambitious new sustainable public garden, awarded the Grand Award 2019 by the British Association of Landscape Industries' (BALI). It's design prioritises a Pine Tree Wilderness and Oak Tree Circle set amongst an existing woodland of TROBI trees of national significance.

Longbridge Town Centre

Working with St. Modwen Homes, we regenerated Longbridge town centre. The green space now supports biodiversity and community wellbeing with 46 new trees, 3,500 shrubs and plants, 6,500 bulbs, several species of wildflowers and bespoke seating for up to 80 people.



Sovereign Housing

Completed in 2020, Lockdown Woods is a new woodland of saplings. As it matures the woodland will help reduce the housing association's carbon footprint and become a wellbeing haven for the community.

Newham Hospital

Barts Health NHS Trust recognised the importance of green spaces in the community. We revamped the new courtyard gardens and revitalized outside spaces into retreats and places of comfort for staff, patients, and visitors.



Green Gains

For almost 50 years, Ground Control has been caring for the UK's green spaces, bringing forward sustainable landscape management solutions for many of the country's most recognised public and private sector landowners in pursuit of our mission to invest in, enhance, and protect our environment.

As a carbon-neutral company and winner of the Queen's Award for Enterprise: Innovation 2021 we are determined to accelerate the pace of change towards a sustainable world, within our own business and within our client organisations too. This is achieved not only through the outdoor spaces we create and maintain; it's achieved through the incredible efforts of our people who make a major contribution to nature's recovery within their local communities.



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If you want to find out more about how Ground Control can help you utilise outside space to reverse nature loss and achieve green gains, please contact:



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