



Imperial College London

Getting more Green

Key findings of a review of smaller municipalities' approaches to delivering green infrastructure

About the project



Nature Smart Cities brings together 11 partners across seven cities in France, Belgium, the Netherlands and the UK, funded by the EU through its INTERREG programme. The project aims to strengthen and develop local authority capacity to provide green infrastructure (GI), particularly in smaller, less well-resourced municipalities. It will do this by **providing a business model with a robust step-by-step methodology**, to determine the financial value of the outputs of a GI project, enabling a more accurate calculation of GI's cost and benefit in comparison with more traditional approaches.

To underpin this process, researchers at Imperial College London have completed a series of **53 face to face interviews with local authority people** who work with GI on a day to day basis, either in making decisions about GI projects or in designing and delivering them.

The key findings presented in this booklet are taken from a comprehensive review.

The full report, by Phil Back and Alex Collins, is available from www.naturesmartcities.eu/library.

What is GI?



It's interesting to discover that there is **no commonly-agreed understanding of GI**. Respondents generally recognise that it is more than simply green space, or planting, but beyond that lies a wide diversity of understanding of the GI concept.

The best-recognised characteristic of GI is multi-functionality, the idea that an installation can fulfil more than just its essential purpose and can have spin-off benefits, planned or unexpected. Others, though, think of GI in terms of connectivity, and describe a network of elements that together add up to more than the sum of their parts. And there are also several who reference GI in terms of beneficial impact, especially on people.

This lack of common understanding might well be a factor limiting the development of GI. If those who come forward with GI proposals are speaking a different language from those who are making the decisions, it may be difficult to describe the beneficial outcomes of a project in ways that will convince decision-makers - especially where the outcomes are less tangible and visible.

Municipal priorities



Understanding municipal priorities is vital to positioning a GI proposal so as to ensure it attracts the necessary support. In this study, **cities assign the highest priorities to making their cities more attractive places to live, to public health, to support for walking and cycling, and to recreation opportunities.** But there are enormous variations in these results between the cities, so anyone coming forward with a GI proposition needs to understand where their municipality's priorities lie, to position their proposal to best advantage.

It's also apparent that **the existence of an overall climate change strategy, or a carbon-reduction commitment, does not necessarily mean that a project that has outcomes in these areas will attract support.**

In some cities, these objectives are too long-term, and too intangible, to affect decisions taken now, especially if there are other influential interests to satisfy. But media coverage of climate issues, and high-profile supporters, are affecting public perception – which is always in a decision-maker's mind.

Obstacles to GI



The biggest obstacle to getting a GI project approved in these cities is not funding – that comes second – but **conflicting priorities within the city**. Most often, these arise when councils are planning for housing or road developments; the need for more housing, or for safer and less congested streets, may predominate over ensuring that green elements find a place.

There are also problems in convincing developers to make their plans greener, and in proving the value of GI in comparison with more traditional, concrete approaches. **Decision-makers have more confidence in the cost calculations of traditional solutions, and it's harder to convince them of the value, and cost-effectiveness, of GI** – especially when the payback is in the more distant future.

Even where planning regimes exist to promote green elements in development, these are not always applied rigorously, especially when the pressure is on to deliver more development units and the space is limited. Smaller cities also often have capacity problems – staff numbers, workloads and resources all impact on the ability to deliver.

Finding the funding



There's no shortage of funding possibilities for GI projects: as well as local authority money, these municipalities are attracting resource from other levels of government, from the EU, from statutory bodies such as environment and water agencies, from developers, and from other private sector interests. There are also possibilities in the voluntary and community sector, where volunteer time can be used as match funding and where responsibility for ongoing maintenance can potentially be devolved.

Philanthropy is also a possibility, especially where large companies are looking to establish their green credentials. However, there are concerns that this could be interpreted as greenwashing of questionable environmental records.

Despite this multiplicity of possibilities, though, **smaller authorities don't have the time to monitor new funding opportunities, don't tend to look at what other municipalities are doing, and are slow to explore potential collaborations across municipal boundaries.**

Assembling the evidence



Because of its multifunctional character, GI proposals lend themselves to being dressed up in different ways for different audiences - so **it may be helpful to emphasise different aspects of the project in different contexts.** This is especially the case where the main project goals are longer term, or less tangible; short term, visible gains may be more appealing to a decision-maker facing election, for instance.

Each city will have its own priorities, which may be social, environmental, or economic. But regardless of the focus of the project, **decision-makers are likely to favour schemes that offer direct, and more immediate, gains for people.**

What cities badly need is a tool for measuring the cost-effectiveness and financial value of GI. Such a tool needs to be usable, comprehensive and convincing; it will also be helpful if it is authenticated by being widely utilised or shared between neighbours. **Any new tool will need to strike a balance between usability, credibility and precision.** Many existing tools fall at one of these hurdles; our challenge will be to overcome this.

The value of a tool



Natural caution may lead decision-makers in smaller cities towards favouring projects that use tried-and-tested approaches, or where project costs are calculated using familiar methods.

But in many instances **green infrastructure offers so much more**. In addition to its primary purpose, a GI project will often offer other benefits, such as biodiversity potential, space for recreation, or even just an improvement in appearance. The multifunctionality of GI means these claims are much more than window dressing – **they are real and genuine benefits, that have a value or offer future savings**.

What will really make the difference, though, is **a tool that can measure and assign a value to these benefits**. If the cost of a new green drainage scheme can be offset by its capacity to reduce flood clear-up costs, provide recreational opportunity, or contribute to public health, a green alternative will offer demonstrable added value and be cost-competitive.

Further information



Want to know more?

- The full project report is now available on our website at www.naturesmartcities.eu/library
- We will also be **hosting events in France, Belgium, the Netherlands and the UK** to explore how smaller cities can build their capacity for GI, see our website for details