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Urban greenspace – space for nature and people?

Notes from the ESCom Scotland - BES Scottish Policy Group Pie and a Pint, 9th May 2017, Edinburgh

Organisers: Chloe Bellamy, Rob Brooker, Jeanette Hall, Camilla Morrison-Bell, Juliette Young

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Background

The British Ecological Society's (BES) Scottish Policy Group (SPG) teamed up with the Ecosystem Services Community (ESCom) Scotland to run their first joint event, a pie and a pint night on urban greenspace. Discussions were focussed on the question: *'Are the provision and management of greenspace in Scotland on track to contribute to the delivery of our Biodiversity 2020 priority aims?'* This document summarises the event and discussions held.

Fifty attendees signed up to attend via an Eventbrite page (the maximum number set for this event) and around 35 people attended from a range of organisations, including:

- Apem
- British Ecological Society
- Centre for Ecology & Hydrology
- City of Edinburgh Council
- Ecometrica
- ECOSOL
- Edinburgh & Lothians Greenspace Trust
- Fell Services
- Fife Council
- Forest Research
- Glasgow School of Art/Openspace Research Council
- Glasgow University
- International Association for Landscape Ecologists UK
- James Hutton Institute
- Lothian & Fife Green Networks Partnership
- Robert Gordon Institute
- Scottish Government
- Scottish Natural Heritage
- Scottish Wildlife Trusts
- Stirling University
- University of Edinburgh
- Wild Reekie

Agenda

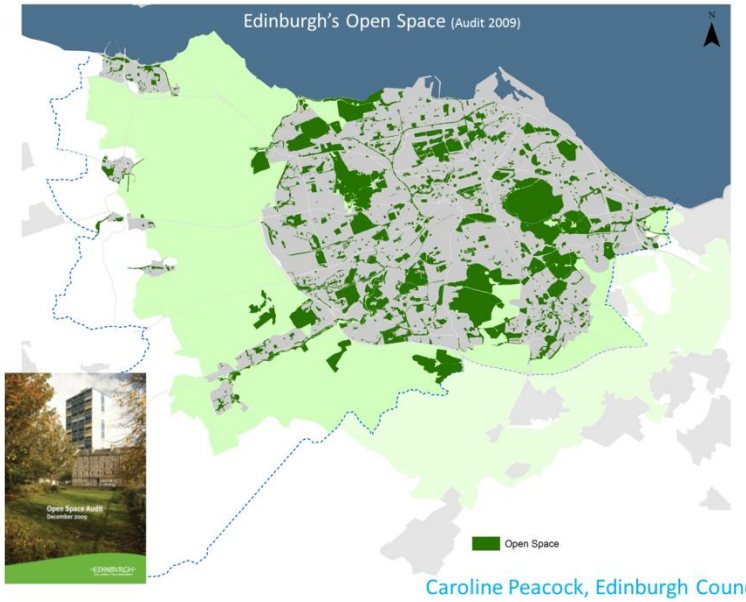
17:00 – 17:25: Arrival – drinks & snacks available
17:25 – 17:30: Introduction to event & speakers
17:30 – 18:00: 5 minute talks by invited speakers
18:00 – 18:50: Break out groups
18:50 – 19:00: Plenary (rapid feedback)
19:00 – 20:00: pies & pints - networking
20:00 – continue discussions in the pub (Holyrood 9A)

Speakers

The event opened with five minute flash talks from five speakers who had been selected to represent a diverse set of issues and expertise related to urban green infrastructure. Each speaker was asked to reflect on this question: *'Are the provision and management of greenspace in Scotland on track to contribute to the delivery of our Biodiversity 2020 priority aims?'* They were offered the opportunity to provide one slide as a backdrop to their talk.

Caroline Peacock, Biodiversity Officer at City of Edinburgh Council. Caroline's main remit is working with the Edinburgh Biodiversity Partnership to deliver the Edinburgh Biodiversity Action Plan.

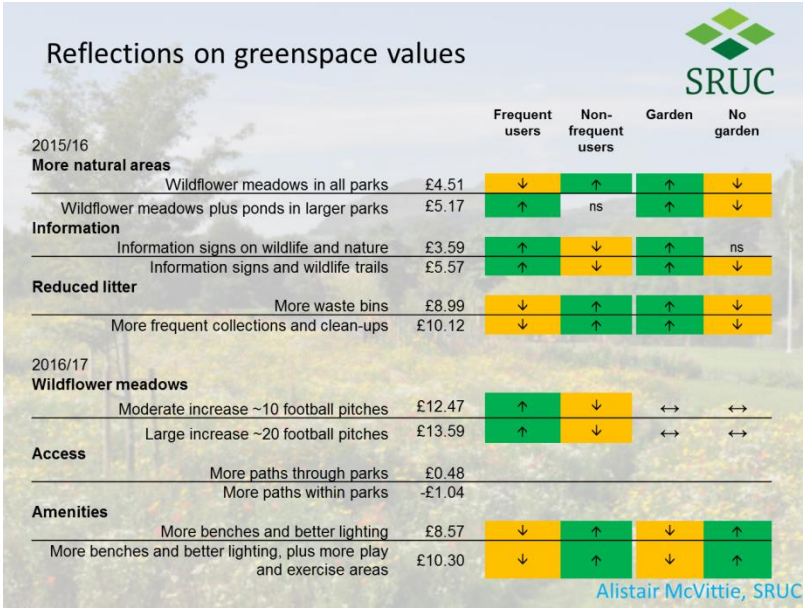
- The City of Edinburgh Council is reviewing its Open Space Strategy, which aims to protect & expand the city's 'green network'.
- Relative to other UK cities, Edinburgh performs well in terms of its greenspace provision.



Caroline Peacock, Edinburgh Council

Alistair McVittie, an environmental economist at Scotland's Rural College. Alistair is undertaking Scottish Government funded research on natural capital accounting and other recent work includes EU funded research assessing the evidence for ecosystem-based climate adaptation, including the use of green infrastructure.

- Small scale valuation studies on greenspace improvement by Edinburgh MSc students showed how people value different greenspace attributes according to their frequency of greenspace use & whether or not they had a garden. Altogether, people were willing to pay the most for steps to reduce litter and to provide more amenities and wildflower meadows.

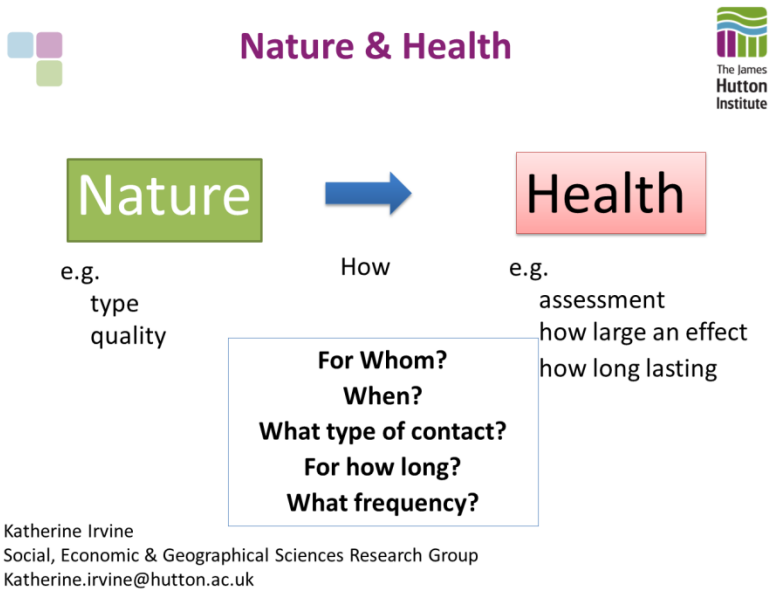


Alistair McVittie, SRUC

Graham Stone, Professor of Ecology at Edinburgh University - a community ecologist with a focus on insect-plant interactions. Graham also co-leads the urban pollinators project in collaboration with Bristol & Reading universities.

- Allotments are key resources for pollinators and provide many benefits to people. More allotments should be provided as a cost effective way to improve a city's biodiversity and cultural ecosystem services value.
- Edinburgh Living Landscape partners are working towards improving Edinburgh for wildlife & people and have launched a 'pollinator pledge'.

Katherine Irvine, an interdisciplinary researcher at James Hutton Institute whose research interests include the wellbeing benefits of nature-interaction and cultural ecosystem services.



- We need more evidence on the specific links between spending time in nature and the health & well-being benefits received. Katherine described how her research aims to help fill this evidence gap, using experiments & qualitative studies to better understand the type and magnitude of benefits received in different contexts.

Marcia Rae, a Countryside Ranger in the Highlands who previously worked for the RSPB and helped run an Inverness Sustainable Urban Drainage (SuDS) project for 18 months to assess their multiple benefits in the urban environment. [No slide]

- Marcia's project highlighted the multiple benefits provided by SuDS, which developers are now obliged to provide in Scotland. As well as facilitating water flow and quality, they also provide habitats for wildlife (particularly amphibians) and health benefits to people. However, some issues surrounding the ownership and maintenance of some SuDS need to be addressed to maximise these benefits.

Graham Stone & Kate Irvine presenting.

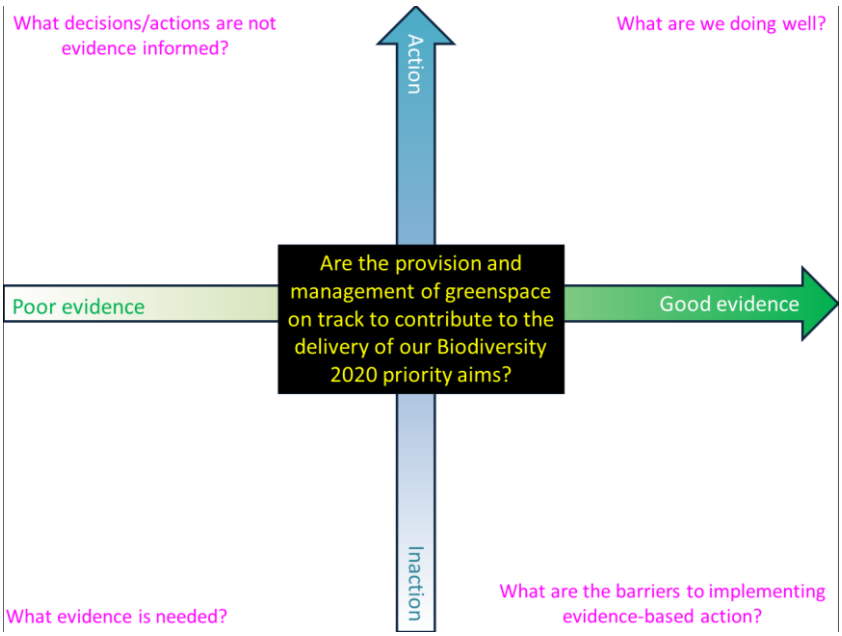
Workshop participants.

Break out groups and discussions – structure

Upon arrival, attendees signed up for one of five topical break out groups, to which one speaker and one facilitator per group had been pre-assigned:

- Biodiversity: Caroline Peacock & Rob Brooker
- Multi-functionality: Graham Stone & Chloe Bellamy
- Green economy: Alistair McVittie & Camilla Morrison-Bell
- Regulatory ecosystem services: Marcia Rae & Jeanette Hall
- Cultural services & health benefits: Katherine Irvine & Juliette Young

Using a printed framework and instructions provided to the facilitators (below) to structure the discussion, participants were asked to consider: *'Are the provision and management of greenspace in Scotland on track to contribute to the delivery of our Biodiversity 2020 priority aims for… (biodiversity/green economy etc.)'.*



Instructions for facilitators

1. Each person should have two different shaped stickers. Ask them to place the first shaped sticker on the chart to indicate where they think we are in terms of evidence and action.
2. Next, provide people a chance to sit and write a few post-it notes to add to the relevant area of the chart – use the second copy of chart for post it notes.
3. Ask them to read them out and stick them on for discussion. Then start encouraging thoughts & post it notes for the other areas of the chart. Encourage discussion.
4. At the end of the 30 mins, go back to stickers & ask them to add on their second sticker to illustrate where they think we are on the chart following the discussion, which might have influenced their thoughts.

Participants spent 30 minutes with their group, followed by 10-20 mins during which they will be able to move around and add to other groups' post-its.

Break out groups adding post-it notes to the framework.

Break out groups reporting back to the workshop.

Break out groups and discussions – summary of discussions

The notes provided by each group's facilitator on the discussions held are provided below alongside a photo of the printed framework with stickers.

1) Biodiversity

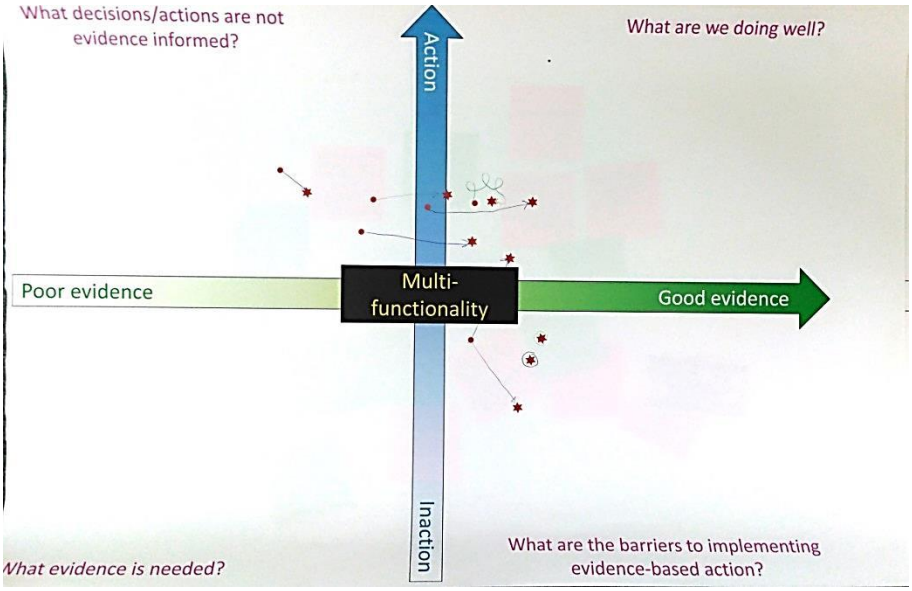
- There is some good activity but not for the reasons we might hope e.g. creation of wildflower meadows because it saves money cutting the grass as opposed to for positive reasons.
- Action is limited by either a lack of access to information reaching the people actually doing the land management, or by a lack of funding.
- There is a lack of breadth in the monitoring of biodiversity responses – do we know how non-charismatic groups are responding (e.g. soil organisms, fungi)?
- We struggle from perceptions: greenspace that is good for biodiversity might not be valued because it looks scruffy and people like land to have a managed feel.
- Some conservation actions are underway which might not be all that worthwhile.
- There are some surprising parallels between issues surrounding the management of biodiversity in urban greenspace and the management of biodiversity in more intensively farmed systems.

- As a result of the discussion perceptions changed a little: initial perceptions (triangles, in the image) became more coalesced around a central point (circles). Discussion therefore seemed to alter one or two more extreme perceptions, but did not alter the average perception in a particular direction.

2) Multifunctionality

- One of the main barriers to action is budgets – the council and practitioners often know what they have to do but can't afford it e.g. individual street trees providing multiple benefits, but are expensive - c.£15,000 each (figure from Graham Stone). They also have to juggle other priorities for space and funding in cities e.g. housing development.
- A key barrier to the success and acceptance of action is communication to the public to get their buy in ('democratisation of knowledge') – when we provide information on why certain activities are being carried out (e.g. mowing less frequently to benefit biodiversity) people are more likely to understand and accept actions. However, doing this isn't easy – stakeholders are very diverse across a city.
- People perhaps gain more benefits from greenspace when they have more opportunity to control and input to decisions e.g. community gardens.
- Multi-functionality can be difficult to understand and it depends what scale you are thinking about. Generally, the feeling was that if you look at a city scale then many Scottish towns and cities are doing well in providing a range of greenspace benefits, but these are not provided evenly across the city. Some disparity in the quality of greenspace linked to deprivation. Also, there is a tendency to think of those services we can more easily understand and appreciate, or those that are more obvious to us (e.g. opportunities for recreation), and to forget about other services that are more hidden, harder to quantify/ understand or that are of less immediate value (e.g. carbon storage).
- There is a cost:benefit ratio to greenspace which should be optimised, but often isn't because it can be complicated to assess multiple benefits. We need a simple, evidence based system to quantify the range of benefits provided by green infrastructure in relation to what is required in that area e.g. scoring development plans on the expected amount, quality and ecosystem services provided by planned greenspace. Could use this as an accreditation scheme.

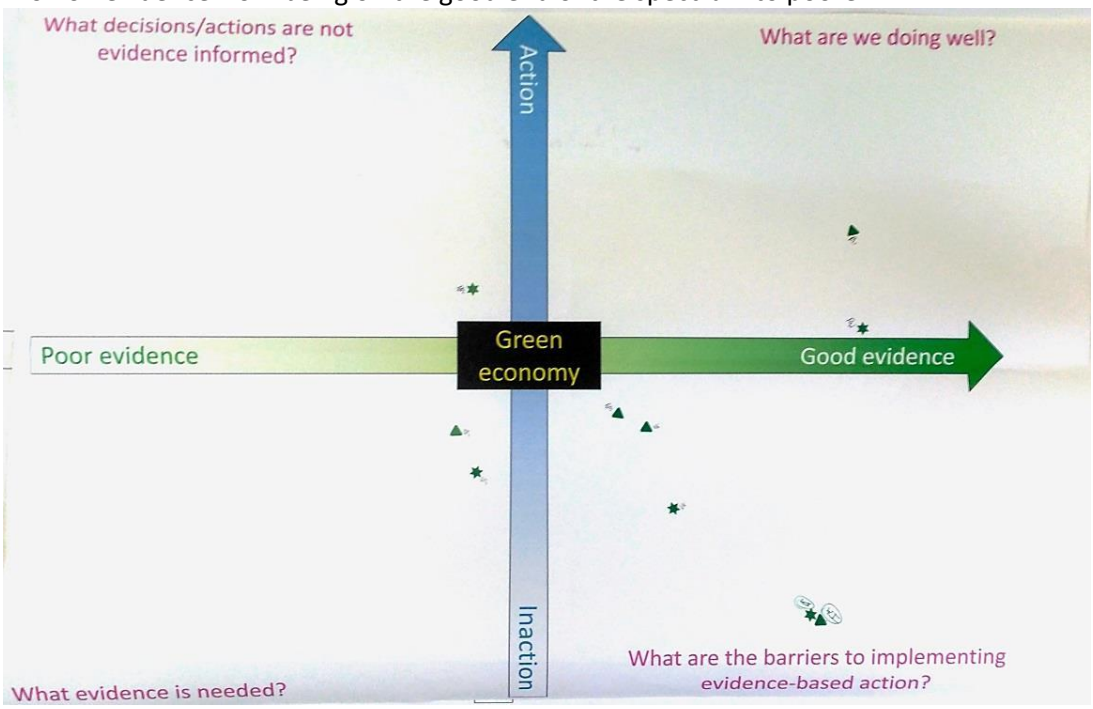
- The first set of stickers (circles) were placed either in the action and poor evidence box or inaction and good evidence box – some greenspace actions/interventions are done as a 'tick box' exercise to meet policy objectives or development obligations, for example. Other things we have good evidence for aren't being acted on because of a range of barriers (see below). After some discussion most people added their second stickers (stars) towards the more evidence side of the framework, suggesting that our conversation convinced them that there is more evidence out there than they previously acknowledged/knew about (particularly when we look outside the UK and consider evidence from studies worldwide).



3) Green economy

- The group interpreted green economy to mean the contribution the environment makes to the economy.
- We need market leaders to pull others along with them and properly account for the environment contribution to their business profits.
- Can the Green Economy drive investment into maintaining and restoring biodiversity?
- Can we truly meet the needs of nature & biodiversity as well as people within the same green space? i.e. by bringing lots of people into green urban spaces does that truly support a rich biodiversity or just a small proportion of it?
- How well do the current actions we undertake deliver for biodiversity? Again do only a few species benefit?
- Currently seems as though we are acting on too much of an ad hoc and patchy basis, a more much planned and joined up approach would be beneficial.
- It was mentioned that often the biodiversity benefits are just a bi-product of another action – i.e. mowing less to save money.
- It was also felt a lot more could be done to create green spaces in urban areas. Although others felt that many would like to do more but cannot pay for the upkeep and maintenance – i.e. tree lined streets.
- In Paris a law was recently passed that allows anyone to plant an urban garden within the city limits. It encourages people to be gardeners of public space - it would be interesting to monitor the impact of this approach.
- Companies who 'put in' green space, are these spaces monitored to know if they are delivering for biodiversity and if they are putting it the right place etc.?
- Overall it was felt that we have more knowledge and evidence to know what to do but the action is lacking.

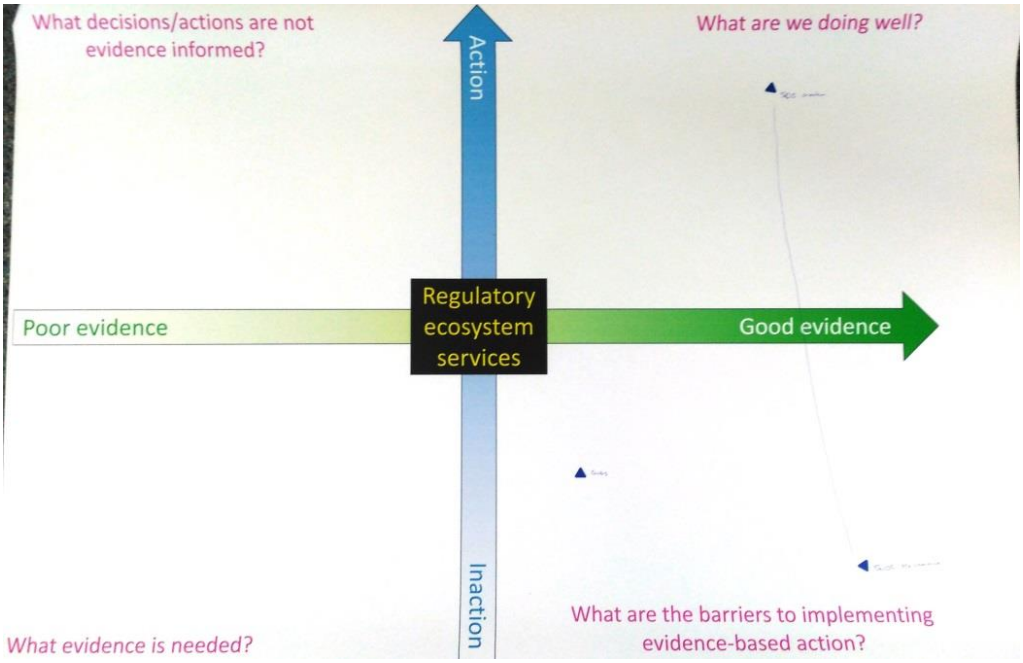
- As a result of the discussion perceptions tended to change only a little: initial perceptions (triangles, in the image) leaned towards there being good evidence available but that it is not being implemented through action. However, the discussion did push one participant to change their opinion on evidence from being on the good end of the spectrum to poorer.



4) Regulatory ecosystem services

- Generally we felt more comfortable writing on the post its, because that allowed us to be more specific.
- A lot of our discussion focussed on SuDS, because of the composition and expertise of the group.
- The main problem with SuDS is the lack of maintenance and management, which is often because of uncertainties over responsibilities and even ownership. Creation is the responsibility of the developer, but when the land changes hands people can lose track. In theory, Scottish Water (SW) was expected to take over responsibility for maintenance and management but in many cases this hasn't happened.
- In some cases, SW requirements for SuDS reduce their value for biodiversity. E.g. they require a path all the way round, which can be a barrier for wildlife, and mown turf, which reduces the habitat value. We are unclear what this requirement is based on, or whether it is just a perception of what is needed for maintenance.
- We also highlighted a few actions which have attracted a lot of attention and been popular, but where evidence is absent or suggests that the action might have negative impacts. E.g. urban hives had a period of popularity, but can be bad for pollinators, as they increase competition for scarce nectar resources. This particular pendulum seems to be swinging back, as the focus is now more on managing land for wild pollinators, and Buglife in particular have produced useful guidance on valuable plants. It is early to say what impact this is having, but it is a useful development.

- We found the stickers quite difficult because there is a range of evidence for different things. For example, there's a lot of good evidence on how to create Sustainable Drainage Schemes (SuDS), which is being translated into action, and there is also a lot of good evidence on managing them, but many are not managed at all. So for this we used two stickers on opposite sides of the sheet, joined with a line. We didn't use a second set of stickers, as our perceptions didn't change as a result of the discussion.



5) Cultural ecosystem services and health benefits

- There is lots of evidence on who comes to urban green spaces and the health benefits people gain from green spaces (although in terms of health benefits, more systematic evaluation could be carried out, e.g. separating greenspace from other parameters). In many cases there is too much information: difficult for practitioners to know where to turn to.
- What is more limited is action in terms of continued conflict between the economy and nature (green spaces always under threat) – due to general apathy from policy; and lack of resources.
- Very limited evidence of how to design greenspaces, specifically guidance for architects and planners. These practitioners simply do not have the information they need in terms of what components of nature to put where, and for whom.
- Green spaces for cultural services and health benefits needs to be better linked to social policy (and input from social scientists).
- There will not be a 'one size fits all' in terms of urban greenspace that can deliver cultural services and health benefits: any planning needs to take account of context (e.g. demographics).
- There is also a gap in terms of research linking with health experts – currently very focused on ecology and social sciences.
- There should be more research on evaluating the provision of urban greenspaces (doctors can't prescribe interaction with greenspace as they don't know where it is, or what can be provided). We should make more of natural experiments to evaluate what works, what doesn't and to assess transferability of lessons learned.

- As a result of the discussion perceptions did change for some participants. Initial perceptions (circles, in the image below) leaned towards there being good evidence available but not implemented. The discussion did lead some participants to tend towards a view where in order for more action to be undertaken, there were still some key gaps in knowledge that needed to be addressed.