

The proposed Energy Transition Zone (ETZ) in St Fittick's Park would be detrimental to the health of the people of Torry

Background

For most people, access to green space where we can come into direct contact with nature, have room to walk, run and play and to experience relative solitude are a vital part of what we would consider a healthy and satisfying life. Over 90% of Scots say that access to green space is very important to them.

Torry is surrounded by two industrial harbours, an industrial estate, a railway line, a sewage works, landfill sites, a regional waste centre, an incinerator that is currently being built, and one of the most polluted roads in Scotland.

The only gap in this circle is St Fittick's Park: it is the last remaining green space aside from the Balnagask golf course that is easily accessible to the population of Torry.

To requisition this last remaining green space for a speculative future economic benefit for the rest of the North East therefore seems highly unjust. This is an area that has the highest concentration of multiple deprivation in the region. To remove St Fittick's would add 'green poverty' to the existing list of deprivations with which the community already contends.

Much of the housing here is poor-quality: small, damp and affected by noise and light pollution. Residents frequently complain of high levels of exposure to antisocial behaviour.

On the other hand, many of the patients and staff of Torry Medical Practice tell us how access to the green space at St Fittick's has helped them with their physical health as well as their mental health. It is where they walk and where their children and grandchildren play. It is a lovely quiet place, where you can escape the pressures of everyday life, walk, jog, or sit quietly and experience nature.

The unequal burden of poor health in Aberdeen City

A revealing comparison in Aberdeen can be made between the area of West End North where the residents of two streets have exclusive access to 15 acres of mature riverside woodland, and Balnagask, the community in Torry that is adjacent to St Fittick's Park. There is a 13-year difference in life expectancy between these two areas, yet it is the community with the lower life expectancy that is threatened with losing its green space. The difference in healthy life expectancy is around twenty years. There is an eight-fold increase in the risk for someone in Torry being admitted to hospital with complications of chronic lung disease, yet it is this community which will lose the trees that help clean the air, and the green space where exercise can be taken to help improve lung function.

Torry has a higher proportion of young people and children living in it. In the next decade the population will increase significantly. In the Balnagask area in particular, there is a significantly higher proportion of dependent children per household than in the rest of the city, and more often in single parent households. Child poverty is accordingly high. Access to private transport is less common in the area and access to distant green space is thus much more difficult. Balnagask also has the highest level of unemployment in the city. Median household income is more than four times greater in West End North compared than Balnagask. Rates of dental decay run at over 80% by the end of primary school. These schools have some of the lowest levels of attendance in the city. Teenage pregnancies are still more than twice the average for the city and around eight times more than for West End North. Prescriptions for antidepressant medication are more than twice those for West End North. Drug-related hospital stays are almost three-times the Scottish average, and drug overdoses are more frequent here than anywhere else in the city. There are also disproportionately high levels of domestic abuse and household fires.

Clinicians from elsewhere in the city who come to Torry to work invariably comment on the surprising frequency and severity of the illness they see here compared with the rest of the city.

The unique health benefits of green space for health

The health benefits of green space are now very well documented both nationally and internationally. Outdoor play for children creates good habits for life, improved sleep, better concentration and reduced stress. Public urban green spaces play an important role in children's and young people's social networks – a vital element in mental health and general resilience. More generally, trees, water and vegetation improve air quality and reduce noise pollution.

For adults of all ages and physical abilities, just spending time in green space is known to lower blood pressure, improve subjective well-being and reduce levels of stress hormones. Exercise in green space produces greater health benefits than the equivalent exercise undertaken in a gym or built environment. Use of green spaces appears to promote social ties and a sense of community.

Green space improves mental health, reduces illness and death resulting from cardiovascular disease, it reduces obesity and the risk of type 2 diabetes, as well as improving pregnancy outcomes.

The health benefits linked with access to green space are thought to be strongest among the lowest socioeconomic groups, including minority ethnic groups. A high proportion of the population of Torry are from minority ethnic groups; in addition to the excess of socioeconomic deprivation in the area, this is a further reason why the community of Torry benefits so much from the green space of St Fittick's.

Local community members have been working to increase the use of the green space by other local residents, so that more are able to access these physical, mental and social benefits. Further public investment in these activities has the

potential to reduce the cost of health and social care for the community. The loss of the green space of St Fittick's will inevitably increase these costs.

National and international commitments to green space for health

The Scottish Government recognises that accessible green space is essential for optimal well-being. In line with this, the Scottish Government has expressed its intention to address the problem of unequal access to green space.

Internationally, good access to green space has been identified as a highly cost-effective means of addressing health inequalities. As the World Health Organisation point out, the benefits of green space are greater for those worst off in society, and has asserted that access to green space is a fundamental requirement for human health, and the UN now recognises the universal right for all to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment - a right which will be included in the forthcoming Human Rights (Scotland) bill.

Conclusion

Scotland's former Chief Medical Officer, Harry Burns, stated that health inequality is not really about unequal healthcare, but about unequal well-being.

We know green space is vital to our wellbeing. Access to green space in Torry mitigates the impacts on health of low income, poor housing and multiple deprivation. It is a vital component of well-being. Take it away and you take away from local people the possibility of optimal health. The loss of St Fittick's would be a retrograde step in the fight against health inequality, and its effects would be clearly measurable.

To us, the idea that St Fittick's should be sacrificed to create what is claimed will be an economic asset for the region makes no sense: it is already an economic, educational, health, psychological and environmental asset to the population of Torry. For them this accessible green space is at least as vital as for any other population in the North east of Scotland. The Scottish Government subscribes to the 4 Capitals Approach to measuring assets: Human, Environmental, Social and Economic. The ETZ in St Fittick's would diminish the first three assets whilst delivering nothing substantive for the local population in the fourth – economic – domain. Indeed, St Fittick's should be seen as an economic asset – its loss would make the area less attractive to house buyers and businesses, and would undermine the health of employees and citizens, placing greater demands on both the public purse and the resources of businesses.

In health terms, loss of green space is not something that can be mitigated except by an equal gain in green space. The people of Torry and the services that support

them are working hard to tackle the gaps in health outcomes that plague the area; the removal of this last piece of green space would permanently undermine those efforts.

Finally, the community has been clear in its opposition to the ETZ at St Fittick's Park. A decision that went against this clear wish of the community would further enhance the sense of powerlessness which underpins much of the burden of chronic ill health that holds back this and similar communities in Scotland.

If Aberdeen City Council and the Scottish government are genuinely serious about addressing health inequalities, then they will not permit the creation of an ETZ on the site of St Fittick's Park in Torry.

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