# The Future of Northern Ireland's Urban Green Spaces

# Vision and Routemap

**"Imagine a future where our urban green spaces are key community assets, connecting people, enhancing nature and helping towns & cities adapt to climate change[1]"**

# Executive Summary

**Urban green spaces\* play a key role in tackling the economic, environmental and health crises of our time. This document sets out a shared Vision for the future of Northern Ireland's urban green spaces to 2030 and beyond. Our Vision looks to set the course for a better future and build a community of leaders who understand and can help to realise the multiple public benefits of high quality urban green spaces in a changing world.**

This project is a collaboration between Northern Ireland Environment Link (NIEL) and National Trust, supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund and Future Parks Accelerator (FPA) Programme. This project has been delivered by Useful Projects and Periscope with research input from Community Places.

The Vision has been co-created with key stakeholders, members of the public and community groups, by exploring potential futures for Northern Ireland and its urban green spaces. It specifically looks to 2030, whilst considering our long-term future beyond this.

Collaboration has been core to project process, as set out in the adjacent diagram (fig 1).

Through multiple research streams, the project team have actively listened to, supported and encouraged views and voices to input into a co-created Vision and Routemap.

### Mapping and Data
August 2022 - November 2022
Exploring the physical and social data story

**Desktop Study**  **Place-based GIS analysis**  **Strategic Policy Context**  **Economic Study**

Case studies
Best practice
Existing research

### Stakeholder Engagement
October 2022 - December 2022
With representatives across
Local Authorities, VCSEs,
Health Sector, Private Sector,
Investors and Academics

**Co-Design Workshop Series**   **One-to-one meetings**

32 people
25 organisations

**Launch: Initial Thoughts**
132 participants

**1: Developing a Vision**
103 participants

**2: Testing the Vision**
81 participants

### Public Engagement
August 2022 - December 2022

**Public Survey**   **Ethnographic Study**

536 responses   2 parks

**Community Workshops**   **School Workshops**

29 adults/youth   57 children

**Ethhnic Minority Study**

11 adults

### Vision Document
February 2023
Emergent themes, issues and policy co-benefits: Health, Climate, Community and Nature

### Routemap
Spring 2023
Co-design workshop to define possible actions to secure public benefits, emerging collaborations and partnerships

1 Project Map
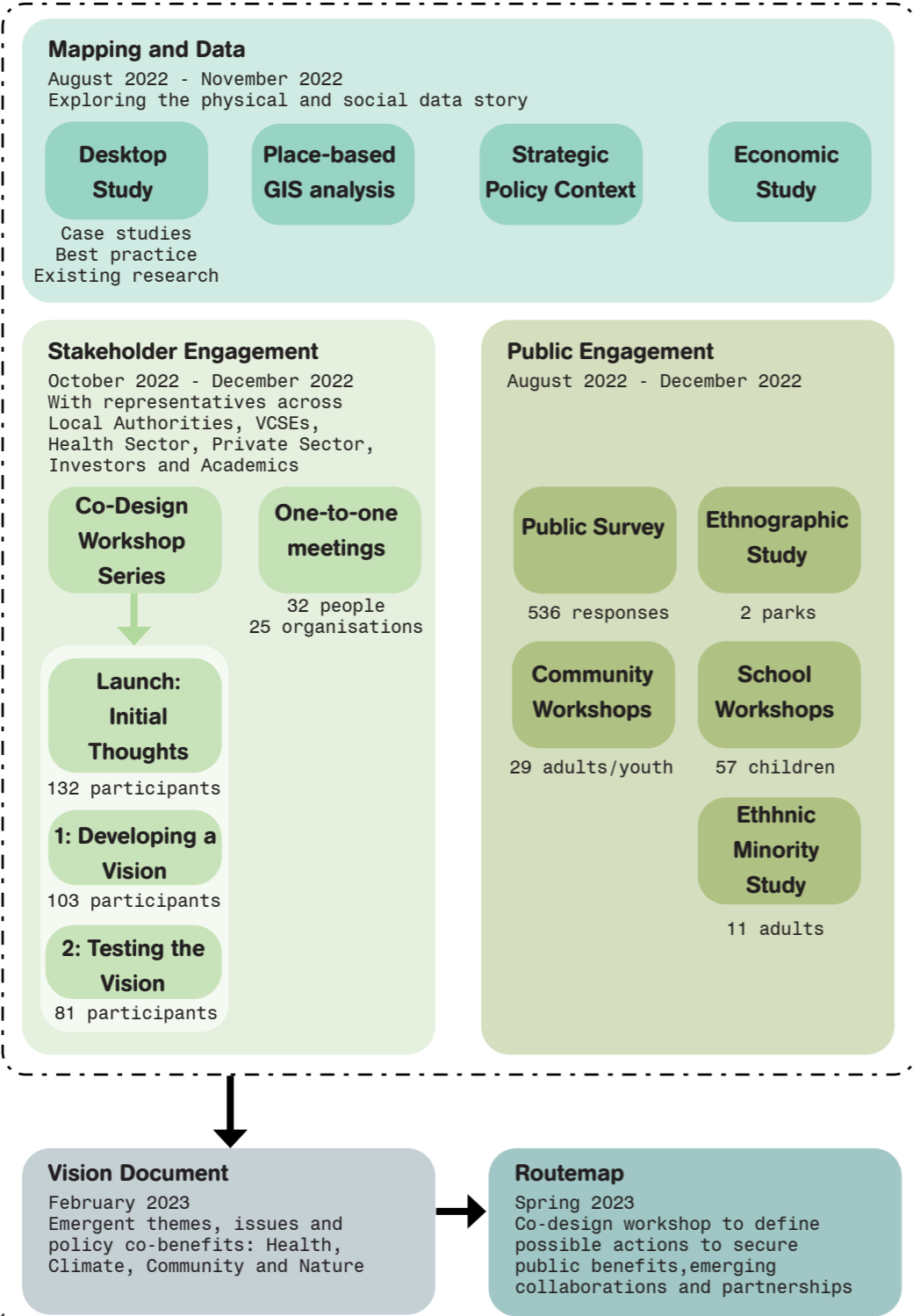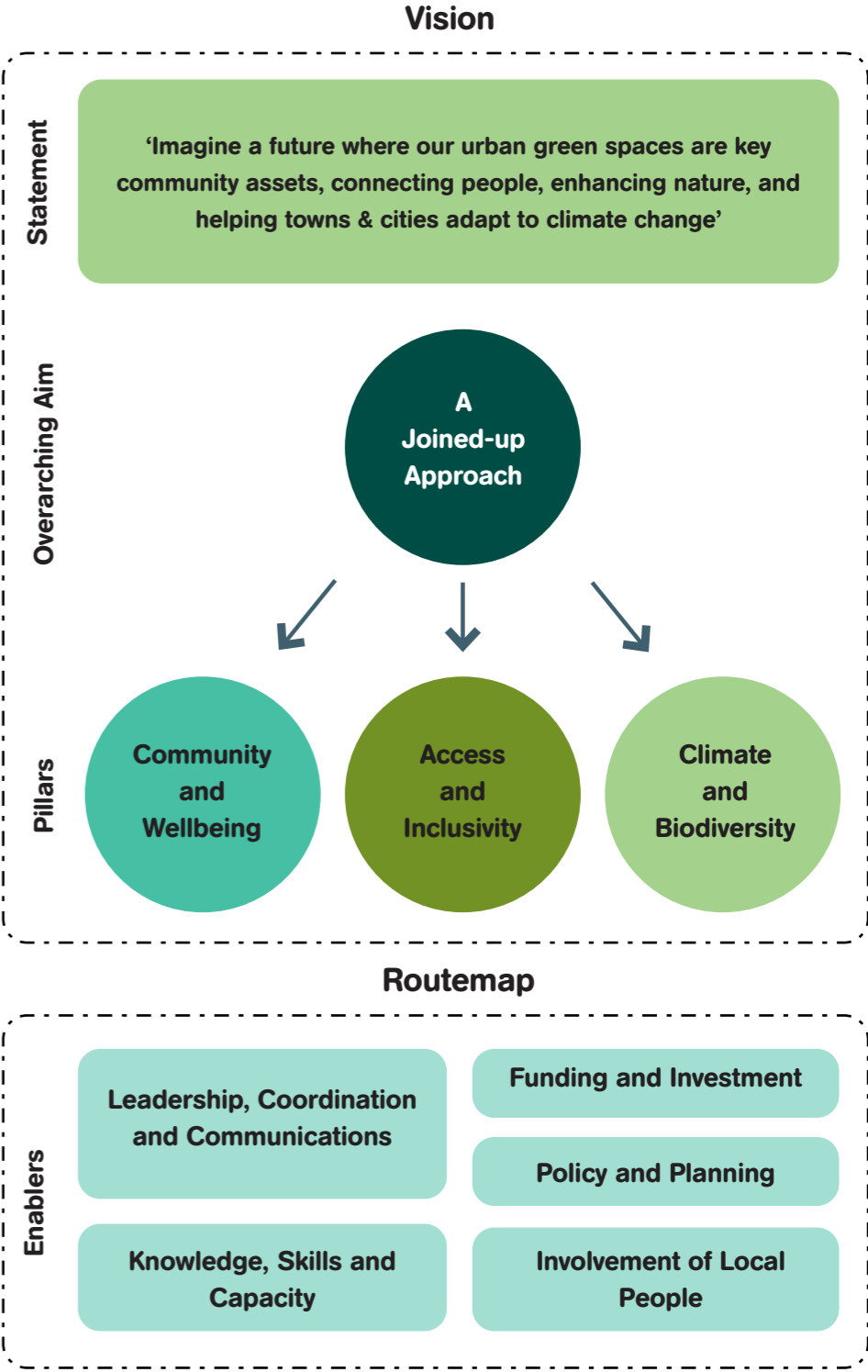2 Vision and Routemap diagram

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Fig 2 illustrates the structure and components of the Vision and Routemap. The Vision comprises a co-created Vision Statement and an Overarching Aim, which sits above three interconnected Vision Pillars.

The Routemap identifies five enablers that stakeholders have identified as key to increasing the potential public benefit of urban green spaces across NI. Through a co-design process, participants also identified potential short, medium and long term actions.

\*Urban green spaces - for the purpose of this project- are defined as areas of green spaces in cities and towns of over 5,000 people, that are publicly accessible, including urban parks, play spaces, green public squares, allotments and other types of food growing, cemeteries, greenways and other informal open spaces that form part of the green and blue network.

## Vision

**Statement**
'Imagine a future where our urban green spaces are key community assets, connecting people, enhancing nature, and helping towns & cities adapt to climate change'

**Overarching Aim**
A Joined-up Approach

**Pillars**
Community and Wellbeing    Access and Inclusivity    Climate and Biodiversity

## Routemap

**Enablers**

Leadership, Coordination and Communications    Funding and Investment

Knowledge, Skills and Capacity    Policy and Planning

Involvement of Local People

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1 Our Vision for the future of Northern Ireland's Urban Green Spaces

# Contents

# 1 Introduction and Context

# 1.1 Introduction

High-quality urban green spaces* play a key role in tackling the economic, environmental and health crises of our time.

This Vision sets a course for a better future for urban green spaces. It looks to build a community of leaders who understand and can help to realise the multiple public benefits of high quality urban green spaces in a changing world.

The Vision has been co-created with key stakeholders, members of the public and community groups, by exploring potential futures for Northern Ireland and its urban green spaces. It specifically looks to 2030, whilst considering our long-term future beyond this.

*Urban green spaces - for the purpose of this project- are defined as areas of green spaces in cities and towns of over 5,000 people, that are publicly accessible, including urban parks, play spaces, green public squares, allotments and other types of food growing, cemeteries, greenways and other informal open spaces that form part of the green and blue network. Refer to the 'Definitions' section opposite.

**Northern Ireland Environment Link (NIEL), National Trust and National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF)**

This project is a collaboration between Northern Ireland Environment Link and National Trust, supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund and Future Parks Accelerator (FPA) Team.
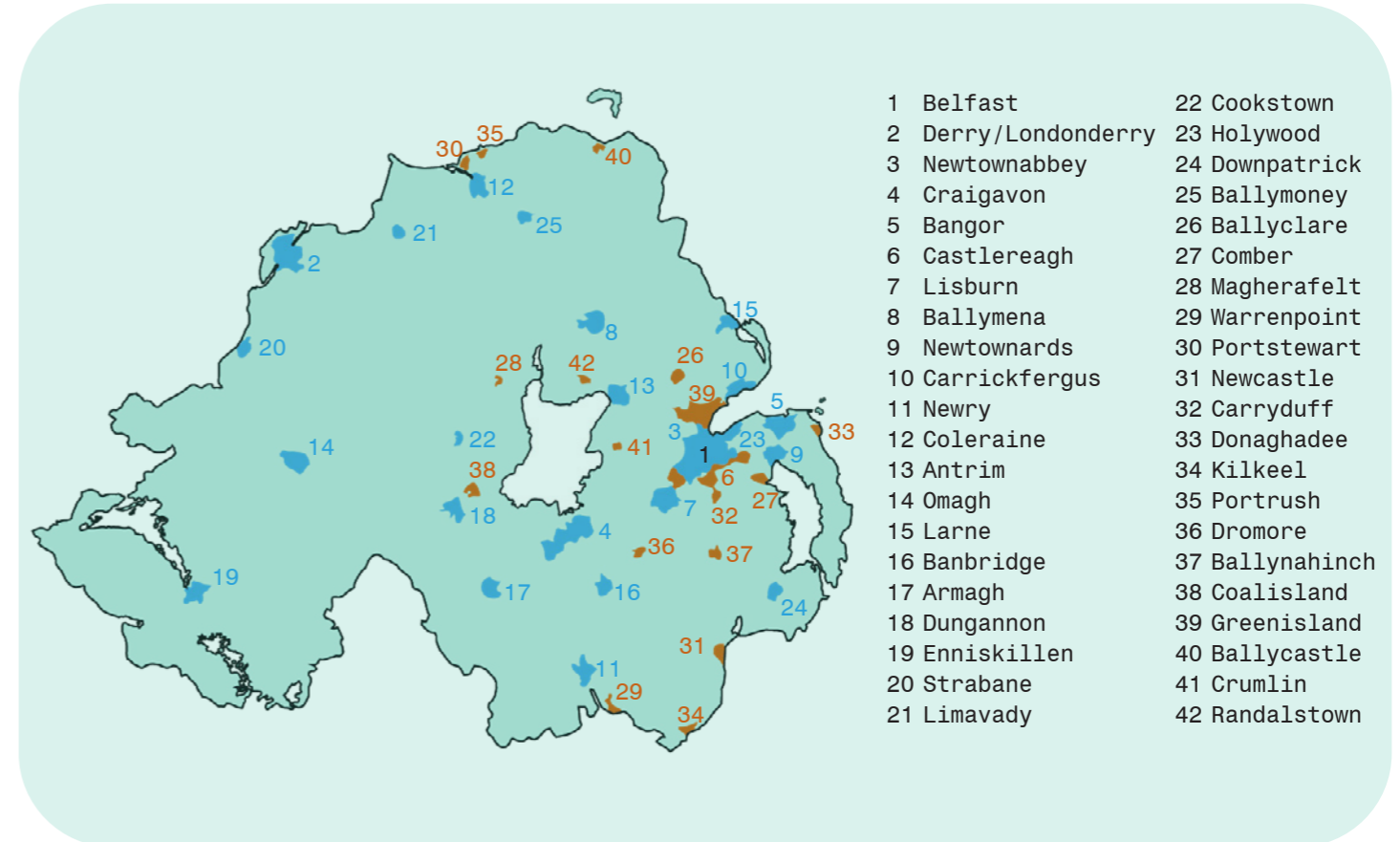
This Vision aims to:
– explore the current collective understanding of urban green space and its multiple public benefits in Northern Ireland
– assess the current gaps and opportunities in progressing Northern Ireland's urban green spaces
– evaluate the potential for urban green spaces to play a key role in addressing the health, climate, and nature crises.
– Identify collaborations, areas of investment and improvement to maximise these benefits for Northern Ireland's urban fabric and people.

**Future Parks Accelerator (FPA) Programme**

The Vision is linked to the Future Parks Accelerator Programme, an initiative that has been delivering nine major projects in England and Scotland to date. No projects have yet been carried out in Northern Ireland. There is a potential for an iteration of the FPA programme to consider the current Vision for Northern Ireland, capturing the current local needs and models which are set herein.

Future Parks Accelerator looks to transform the relationship between urban parks and their communities so that these places can deliver ever-greater levels of public benefit and become financially sustainable. In other words, FPA's focus lies on public parks that are valued as essential assets and shared civic responsibility.

Over the past decade, the National Trust has been working in places across the country to understand what is needed for urban green spaces to thrive, to become financially sustainable, and more fully reflective of the needs and desires of the local community. Most recently, National Trust has been a lead partner in the FPA alongside NLHF with support from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities in England and Scotland.

1 Urban classification map of Northern Ireland. Source: Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA)
2 Population breakdown by settlement type, 2011. Source: NISRA. 2021 Census data are yet to be published.



| 1 Belfast | 22 Cookstown |
| 2 Derry/Londonderry | 23 Holywood |
| 3 Newtownabbey | 24 Downpatrick |
| 4 Craigavon | 25 Ballymoney |
| 5 Bangor | 26 Ballyclare |
| 6 Castlereagh | 27 Comber |
| 7 Lisburn | 28 Magherafelt |
| 8 Ballymena | 29 Warrenpoint |
| 9 Newtownards | 30 Portstewart |
| 10 Carrickfergus | 31 Newcastle |
| 11 Newry | 32 Carryduff |
| 12 Coleraine | 33 Donaghadee |
| 13 Antrim | 34 Kilkeel |
| 14 Omagh | 35 Portrush |
| 15 Larne | 36 Dromore |
| 16 Banbridge | 37 Ballynahinch |
| 17 Armagh | 38 Coalisland |
| 18 Dungannon | 39 Greenisland |
| 19 Enniskillen | 40 Ballycastle |
| 20 Strabane | 41 Crumlin |
| 21 Limavady | 42 Randalstown |

● Urban (population greater than 10,000 with City/Town Centre)
● Other Urban (population of 5,000 - 10,000)

1
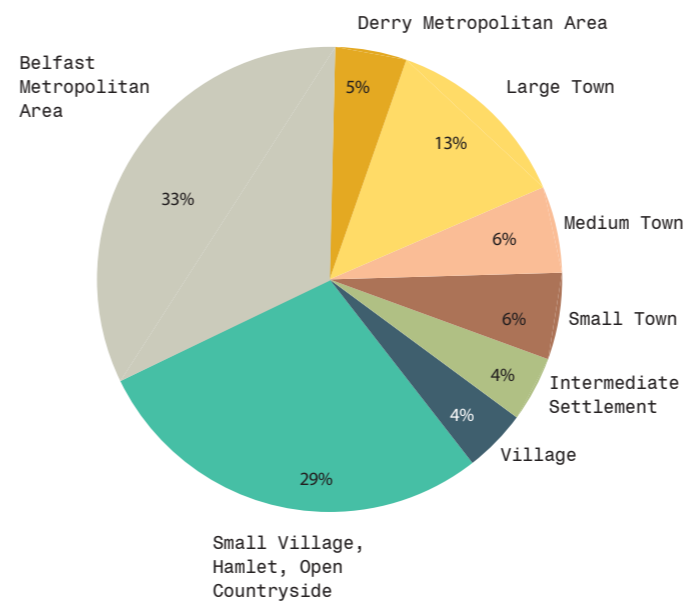


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**Definitions**

Urban = Population centres of over 5,000 (NISRA)

Urban Green Space = Green spaces in cities and towns, first and foremost existing, providing free access for recreation and enjoyment. Our definition includes – but is not limited to – urban parks, play spaces, allotments, squares, cemeteries, woods, nature sites and informal green spaces. (NLHF)

For the purpose of the Vision document, the definition also includes other aspects of green and blue network such as greenways, and urban coastal areas.

# 1.2 The Project

**A truly collaborative approach has been vital in co-creating a Vision that includes multiple voices, perspectives, aims and attitudes. Close collaboration between the steering group and project team, as well as with community and stakeholder groups has been core to the process.**

### Steering Group

Northern Ireland Environment Link (NIEL) is the networking and forum body for non-statutory organisations interested in the natural and built environment of Northern Ireland. Members are involved in environmental issues of all types and at all levels from the local community to the global environment. NIEL bring together a wide range of knowledge, experience and expertise which can be used to help develop policy, practice and implementation across a wide range of environmental fields. It provides a reliable and convenient single point of contact to a diverse range of environmental charities, working in urban and rural areas across Northern Ireland.

The National Trust is Europe's largest conservation charity, protecting and caring for places so people and nature can thrive. They look after the coastline, historic sites, countryside and green spaces, ensuring everyone benefits.
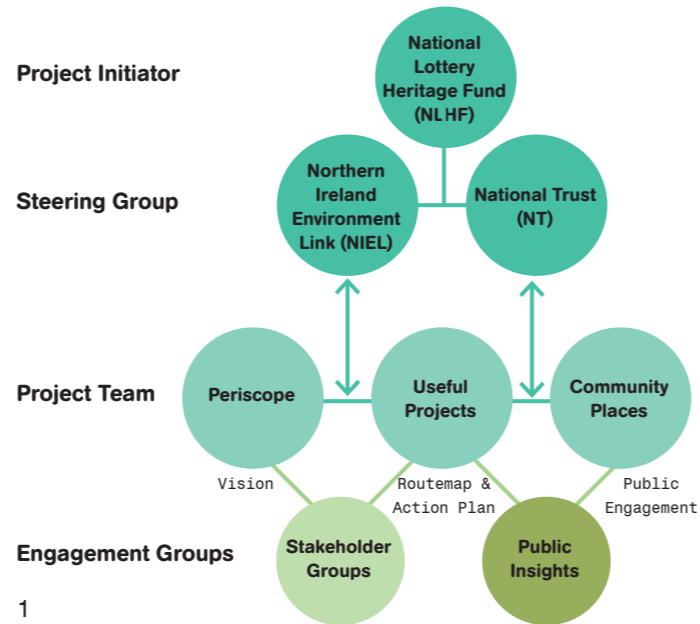
### Project Team

Periscope is a design practice skilled in the fields of landscape, architecture and urbanism, designing and delivering projects that work for people and the planet. Collaboration is core to Periscope's process, focusing on open dialogue and shared objectives.

Useful Projects is a leading sustainability consultancy driving positive change for the society and the environment specialising in sustainability research, strategy and action plan development and implementation support.

Periscope and Useful Projects are both BCorps and have collaborated for over five years on sustainability strategies, social and environmental value projects and urban green spaces.

Community Places is a not-for-profit organisation with over 30 years experience in planning, community planning and engagement in Northern Ireland.

1 Team Diagram
2 Project Map



Project Initiator
Steering Group
Project Team
Engagement Groups

1

### Engagement Process

The project team have worked with groups across Northern Ireland to listen to and support their proactive participation in the planning, development and improvement of their communities at a physical, social, cultural, environmental and spatial level.

The stakeholder co-design workshops were attended by a wide range of sectors including public sector, health, business, local charities, and community groups. Key voices were brought together to iteratively test the emerging Vision, identifying priorities and gaps. Rigorous analysis and reflection took place at each stage, ensuring as many voices as possible were included, whilst retaining a continuity of core voices.

A series of public engagement events targeted a range of community groups, schools and individuals across different geographies, backgrounds and of varying ages. An ethnographic study included interviews with park users. A public survey collated opinions across a wide public audience.

The research and key findings are summarised in Section 2 of this Vision.

### Emerging Collaborations

The conversational surveys and engagement events have set the ground for emerging collaborations and networks. The process has helped identify specific groups and individuals who have a vested interest in furthering green space improvements across Northern Ireland. Such groups and individuals can form the steering group for the Routemap & Action Plan and beyond.



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# 1.3  The Value of Urban Green Space

**The Covid-19 pandemic has exposed deep inequalities in access to green space and nature in many neighbourhoods, towns and cities. With a renewed focus on climate resilience, green space advocacy, community action and activism, we have started on a vital journey to reclaim our public spaces for the good of our communities, health and environment. For now, and for future generations.**

Parks and green spaces are an essential part of urban infrastructure and key community assets. Whilst urban green spaces clearly provide numerous social, environmental and economic benefits (as summarised below), these are often poorly evidenced. Methods such as 'cost benefit analysis', 'natural capital accounting', 'social return on investment analysis' can be used for valuing urban green space, but further work is needed to develop the evidence base to underpin valuation and support investment decisions in current and future urban green spaces. This has been embedded into the Routemap & Action Plan emerging from this project.

## Social

Urban lifestyles are associated with heightened stress, not enough physical activity and exposure to air pollution and noise. Urban green spaces can improve mental and physical health and reduce morbidity and mortality in urban residents by providing psychological relaxation and stress alleviation and supporting physical activity; they are places where we can all walk, run, exercise, play and experience tranquillity. Derry City and Strabane District Council estimated the mental and physical health benefits of their public green spaces to be worth around £137m per annum[1].

Urban green spaces also support social interactions for friends and families across generations and social groups, which engenders feelings of belonging, acceptance, and connectedness.

They also contribute to a preventative health agenda. Research by 'Fields in Trust' estimates that parks and green spaces are estimated to save the NHS around £111m per year based solely on a reduction in GP visits and excluding any additional savings from prescribing or referrals. They also report the Wellbeing Value associated with the frequent use of local parks and green spaces is worth £34.2 billion per year to the entire UK adult population[2].
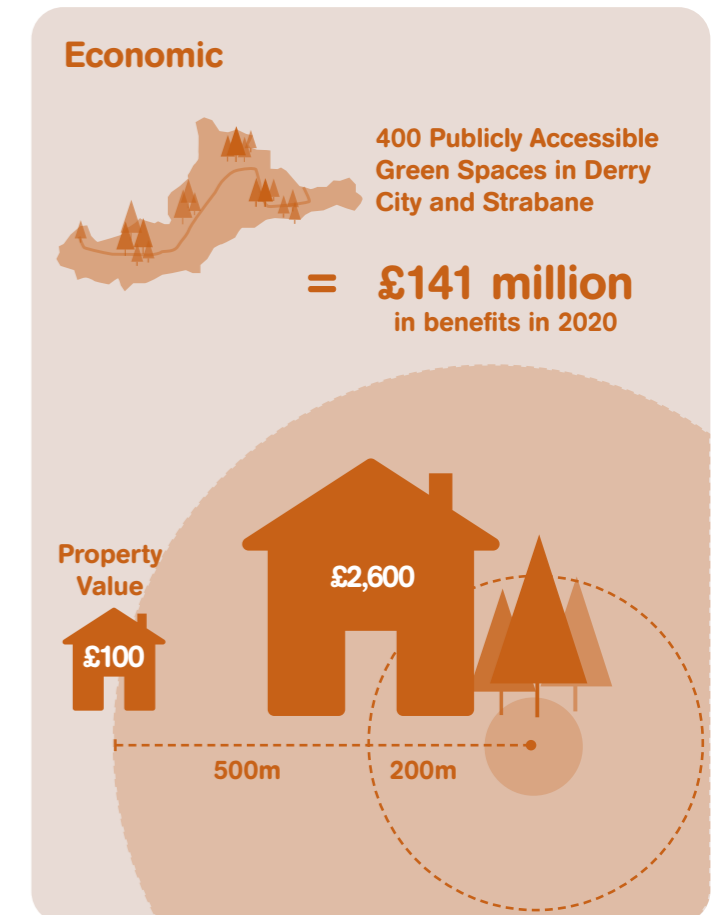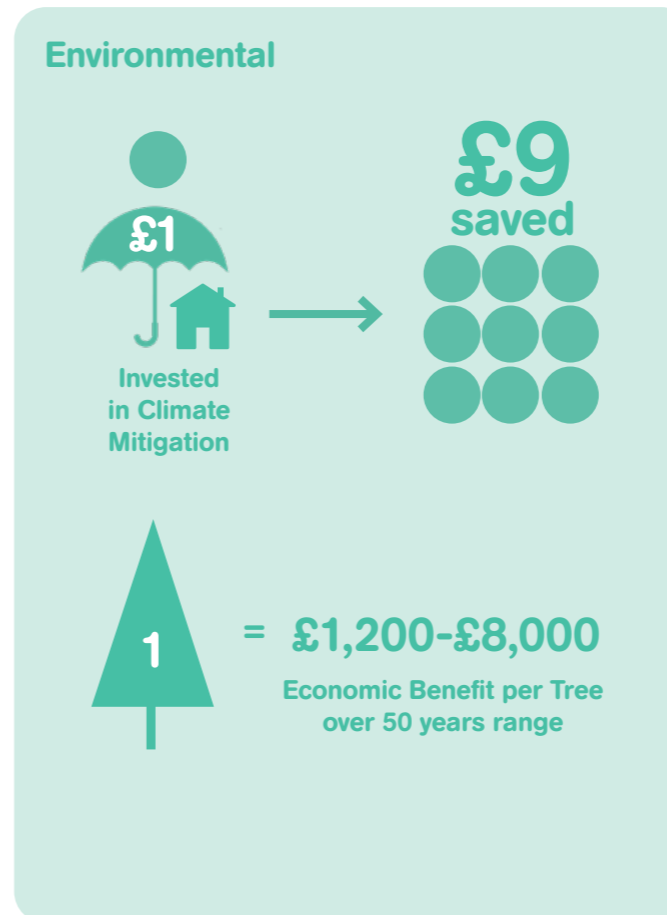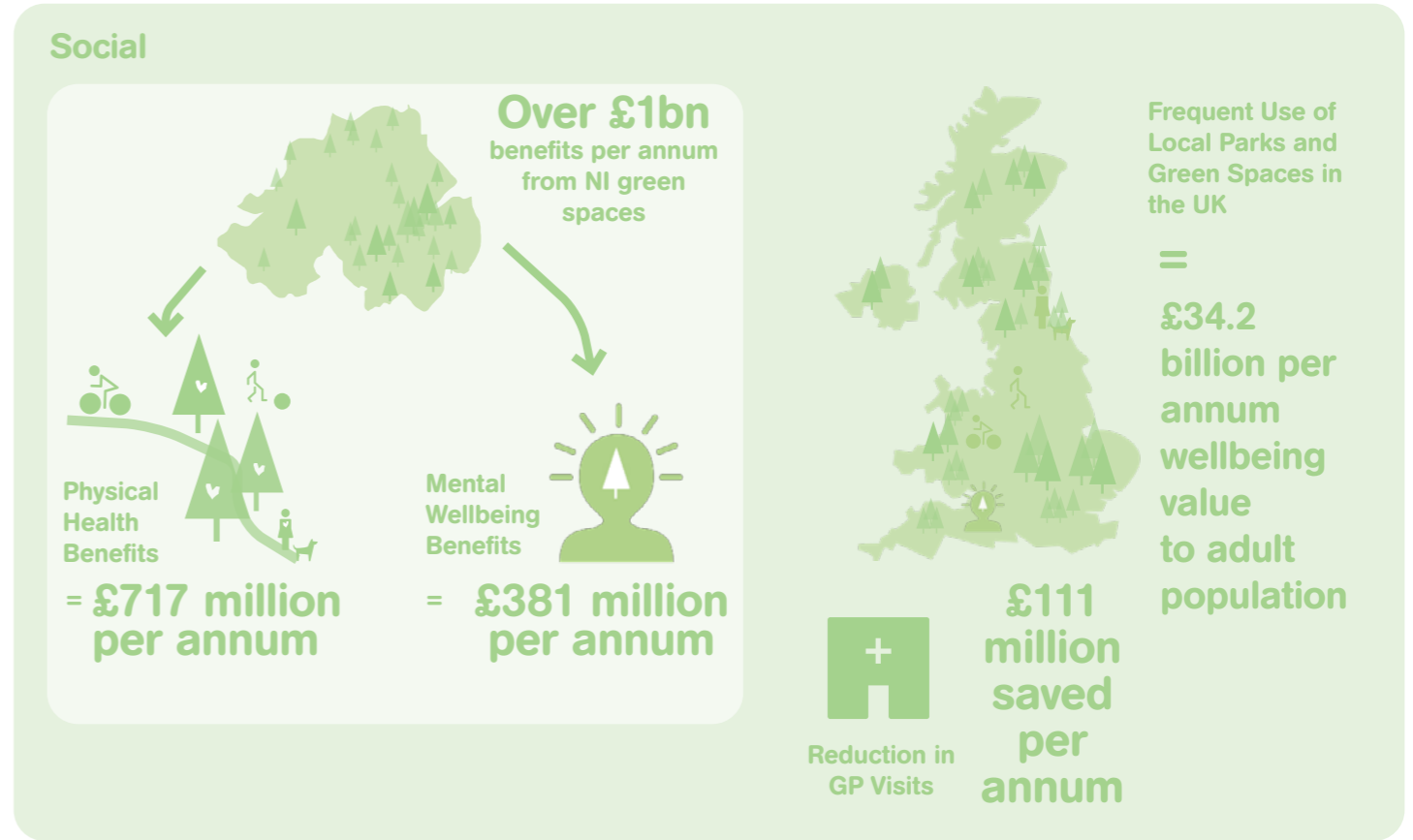
## Environmental

The future effects of climate change are predicted to result in significant financial costs to manage, meaning investment in mitigation today will be many times cheaper than the cost of adaptation in the future. For every £1 invested in climate mitigation and protecting communities from the impacts of extreme weather events a further £9 is saved[3]. Urban green spaces' effectiveness in climate change mitigation and adaptation, through flood management and carbon sequestration, reduction of the heat island effect, along with other numerous co-benefits (e.g. improved air quality) strengthen the case for investment in them. Urban green spaces can enable wildlife to thrive and support biodiversity net gain in our towns and cities, bringing multiple ecosystem, health and economic benefits. Depending on how and where trees are planted in urban areas, a conservative estimate of the economic benefit per tree over 50 years ranges from £1,200 to £8,000[4].

## Economic

Green spaces in urban environments also bring economic benefits. An estimate of over £1.1bn of benefit per annum has been gained from Northern Ireland's publicly accessible urban green spaces. The greatest proportion of this value is attributed to mental and physical health benefits. Well-maintained green spaces with amenities attract visitors and tourists, supporting local economies. Indeed, proximity to green space has been shown to increase property value with properties located within 200 metres of green space tending to be, on average, £2,500 more expensive than if they were located 500 metres away[1]. They also attract higher levels of investment by uplifting the town/city's image, and provide employment and skills development opportunities.

For a detailed analysis on the Economic Value of Urban Green Spaces in Northern Ireland refer to Appendix G.

1 Derry City & Strabane Natural Capital Account of Outdoor Recreation Greenspaces, 2021
2 Fields in Trust, Revaluing Parks and Green Spaces, 2018
3 The Economic Benefits of Local Climate Action, October 2021, researched and produced by Centre for Sustainability, Equality and Climate Action, Queens University Belfast and the Place-Based Climate Action Network for UK100
4 Green Blue Urban, Street tree cost benefit analysis, 2018



**Social**

Over £1bn benefits per annum from NI green spaces

Physical Health Benefits = £717 million per annum

Mental Wellbeing Benefits = £381 million per annum

Reduction in GP Visits — £111 million saved per annum

Frequent Use of Local Parks and Green Spaces in the UK = £34.2 billion per annum wellbeing value to adult population



**Environmental**

£1 Invested in Climate Mitigation → £9 saved

1 = £1,200-£8,000 Economic Benefit per Tree over 50 years range



**Economic**

400 Publicly Accessible Green Spaces in Derry City and Strabane = £141 million in benefits in 2020

Property Value £100 / £2,600

500m / 200m

# 1.4 Urban Green Spaces in Northern Ireland Today

## Mapping green spaces across Northern Ireland highlights the importance of quantity, and perhaps even more crucially, access.

Spatial analysis shows that of the region's 477.2km² of urban area, 38.2km² is publicly accessible green space. This proportion of green space to urban area equates to 8% - this is much higher than England, Scotland, and Wales (5%, 4%, and 4% respectively).

At a city/town level, the percentage of publicly accessible green space falls dramatically. Despite 63% of NI's population living in urban areas, only 3.5% of publicly accessible green spaces are located within urban areas.
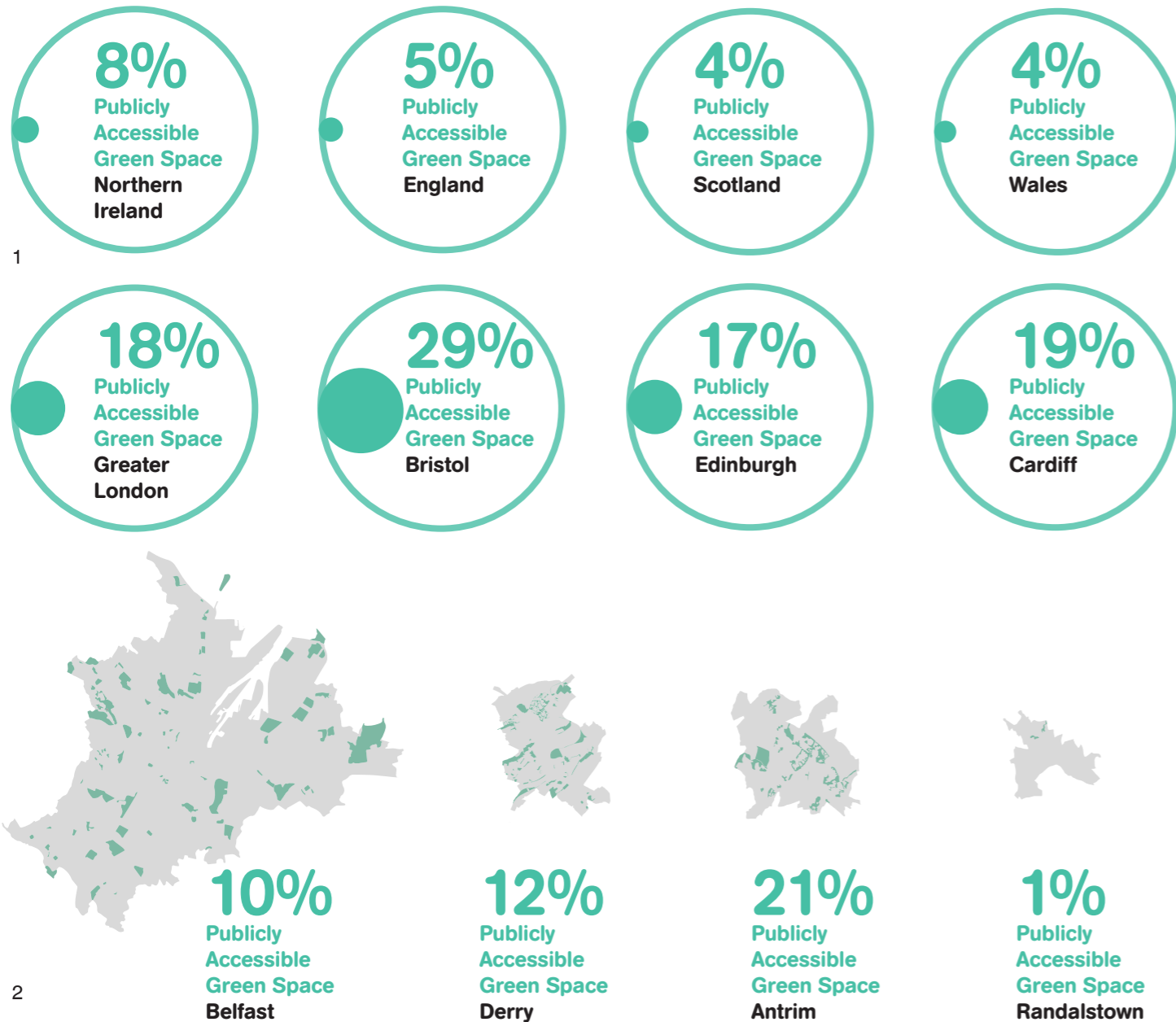
Despite Antrim town having an impressive 21% publicly accessible green space within its development limit, other towns such as Randalstown are as low as 1%. Some of these statistics appear skewed because urban areas sit adjacent to large rural green spaces, and urban communities benefit greatly from those. For example, much of the Belfast Hills' publicly accessible sites are just beyond the urban boundary of Belfast City. Their direct adjacency to the large populations in the North and the West of the city means that they are an important aspect of the city's green provision. The publicly accessible area of the Belfast Hills is 14.5 km², almost double the area of all publicly accessible green space within Belfast (7.7 km²).

For a detailed analysis on Access to Green Space in Urban Areas of Northern Ireland refer to Appendix H.

**8%** Publicly Accessible Green Space **Northern Ireland**

**5%** Publicly Accessible Green Space **England**

**4%** Publicly Accessible Green Space **Scotland**

**4%** Publicly Accessible Green Space **Wales**

1

**18%** Publicly Accessible Green Space **Greater London**

**29%** Publicly Accessible Green Space **Bristol**

**17%** Publicly Accessible Green Space **Edinburgh**

**19%** Publicly Accessible Green Space **Cardiff**

2

**10%** Publicly Accessible Green Space **Belfast**

**12%** Publicly Accessible Green Space **Derry**

**21%** Publicly Accessible Green Space **Antrim**

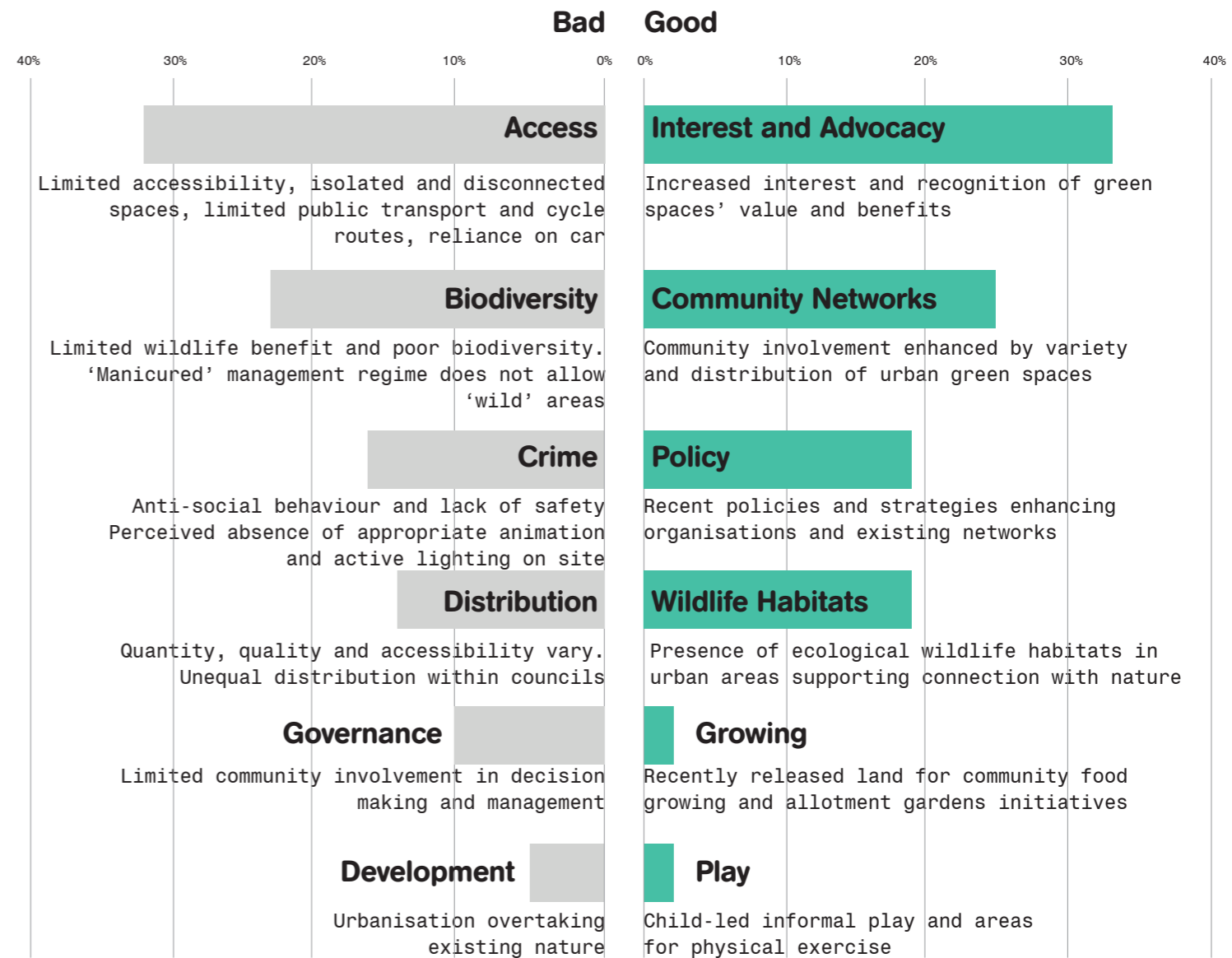**1%** Publicly Accessible Green Space **Randalstown**

## Qualitative review of current Urban Green Spaces in Northern Ireland

78 of Northern Ireland's best-managed parks and open spaces have been recognised with the international standard of excellence, the Green Flag Award. However, many other sites have been contested spaces, neglected, and experience vandalism.

Our initial engagement events looked to supplement this data with first-hand opinions of the primary benefits and issues that Northern Ireland's urban green spaces currently face.

The graphic diagram below presents the collated outcome of the comments raised by stakeholders during the initial engagement workshop in November 2022. The participants discussed what is good and bad about Northern Ireland's urban green spaces today as well as primary benefits that could form opportunities for the future.

The size of the bars below are proportionate to the number of times these issues were raised by participants.

**Bad** | **Good**

**Access**
Limited accessibility, isolated and disconnected spaces, limited public transport and cycle routes, reliance on car

**Interest and Advocacy**
Increased interest and recognition of green spaces' value and benefits

**Biodiversity**
Limited wildlife benefit and poor biodiversity. 'Manicured' management regime does not allow 'wild' areas

**Community Networks**
Community involvement enhanced by variety and distribution of urban green spaces

**Crime**
Anti-social behaviour and lack of safety Perceived absence of appropriate animation and active lighting on site

**Policy**
Recent policies and strategies enhancing organisations and existing networks

**Distribution**
Quantity, quality and accessibility vary. Unequal distribution within councils

**Wildlife Habitats**
Presence of ecological wildlife habitats in urban areas supporting connection with nature

**Governance**
Limited community involvement in decision making and management

**Growing**
Recently released land for community food growing and allotment gardens initiatives

**Development**
Urbanisation overtaking existing nature

**Play**
Child-led informal play and areas for physical exercise

3

1 Country comparisons. Source: ONS, ORNI.
2 City comparisons. Source: ONS, GiGL, ORNI.
3 Results from current green space collated during the initial Stakeholder Engagement Workshop (17.11.22 and 21.11.22).
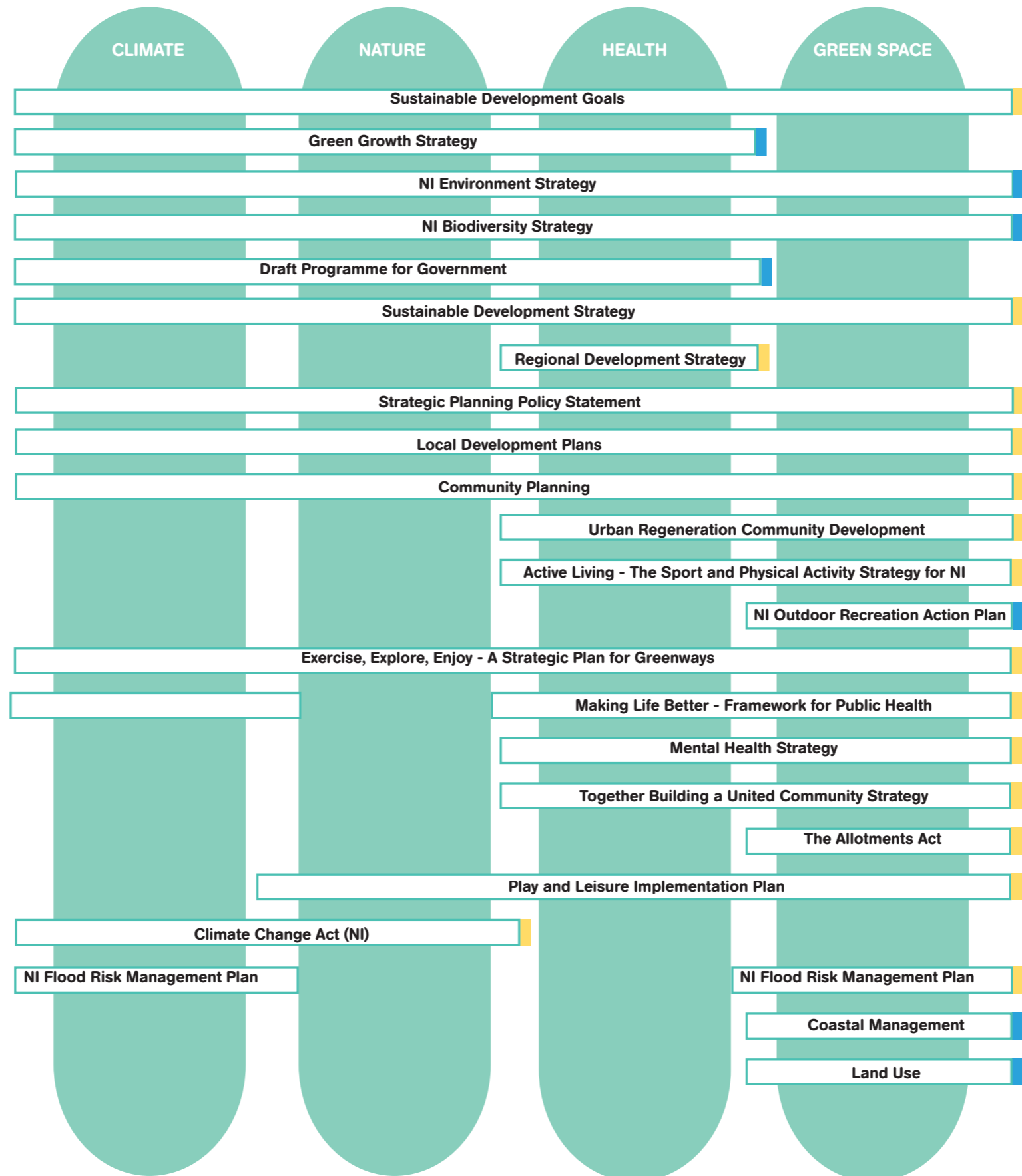
# 1.5  Policy Context

A review of policies relevant to the use of Urban Green Spaces (UGS) in Northern Ireland has been undertaken, and is included in Appendix A. This review demonstrates that there are a wide range of policies and strategies that make reference to the importance of green space/the environment for many different aspects of societal life. These include the Sustainable Development Strategy, Regional Development Strategy, draft Programme for Government, Urban Regeneration Community Development (URCD) policy framework, Biodiversity Strategy, Outdoor Recreation Action Plan, Mental Health Strategy, Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland), draft Green Growth Strategy, and the draft Environment Strategy.

However, many policies are in draft form or are out of date. The current lack of investment into green spaces suggests that clear policy on this agenda is highly important, and the effective implementation of these policies is particularly crucial. Under-investment was identified at the Stakeholder Engagement workshops as a key barrier to effectively maintaining green spaces.

**Policy Analysis: Overlaps and Gaps**

The adjacent diagram analyses how current policies in Northern Ireland overlap across four key themes: climate, nature, health, and green space.

For a detailed Policy Review refer to Appendix A.



CLIMATE   NATURE   HEALTH   GREEN SPACE

Sustainable Development Goals
Green Growth Strategy
NI Environment Strategy
NI Biodiversity Strategy
Draft Programme for Government
Sustainable Development Strategy
Regional Development Strategy
Strategic Planning Policy Statement
Local Development Plans
Community Planning
Urban Regeneration Community Development
Active Living - The Sport and Physical Activity Strategy for NI
NI Outdoor Recreation Action Plan
Exercise, Explore, Enjoy - A Strategic Plan for Greenways
Making Life Better - Framework for Public Health
Mental Health Strategy
Together Building a United Community Strategy
The Allotments Act
Play and Leisure Implementation Plan
Climate Change Act (NI)
NI Flood Risk Management Plan
NI Flood Risk Management Plan
Coastal Management
Land Use *

Key

Current
Draft
Out of date
* Lobbying for
1 Northern Ireland Current Policy thematic overlaps. Current at time of writing.

# 1.6  Case Studies

The following case study projects have been compiled to provide benchmark approaches to good urban green space improvement projects. These encompass local projects in Northern Ireland as well as exemplar projects across the UK and Europe, at scales from community-led interventions and infrastructural projects (case studies 1-4) to city-wide green infrastructure initiatives and policies (case studies 5-6).

Source: EastSide Greenways
https://www.eastsidegreenways.com/

*Social return on investment analysis of an urban greenway. Cities & Health Vol.6 2022. Issue 4

**1   Connswater Community Greenway (CCG), Belfast**
**Connection as a driver for renovation**

Completed in 2017, CCG is a major urban regeneration project providing a 9 km linear greenway to east Belfast. It includes the East Belfast Flood Alleviation Scheme (EBFAS) in a community asset for local and beyond population.

The project looks at connecting open and green spaces to create conditions for renovation of an existing long-neglected and polluted ecosystem. Phase 1 project prioritised areas subject to flooding and requiring urgent care. A 'phased' approach to the Greenway development also meant that sections were opened and made accessible to the community as quickly as possible, so that local people could use the facility and quickly see what the project was aiming to achieve.

Redevelopment of the water courses that the greenway traverses included flood alleviation protecting 1,700 homes from future flooding, with the removal of rubbish in the river improving water quality, and major landscaping to improve biodiversity.

Research estimated the total monetary benefits of the greenway would be between £100-200m from an initial investment of £35m*.



1

**2   The Cornfield Project, Coleraine, Northern Ireland**
**Linking people together through nature**

The vision for this urban green space initiative was to transform the Cornfield site that lies between the Millburn and Ballysally estates (Coleraine's largest social housing area), and, in doing so, bridge two divergent communities. The Cornfield Project transformed a previously abandoned and unloved area of land into a thriving nature zone with lots of social activity.

Prior to 2014, the site featured large-scale littering, regular fires, anti-social behaviour and was unused by most of the community. A partnership between Focus on Family in Ballysally and Millburn Community Association began a long-term process of site regeneration. Initial litter removal and environmental clear ups were shortly followed by the project winning the Grow Wild NI flagship site award in 2015. This enabled funding to develop woodland areas, wildflower meadows, community gardens, youth hang-out spaces, an allotment, outdoor classrooms as well as lots of community engagement. The project is Northern Ireland's flagship site for the Kew Gardens Grow Wild Initiative.

This has been followed up with the recent addition of a Men's Shed, outdoor gym, polytunnel and Veteran's Group facility. The site now attracts over 1000 weekly visitors and the team behind the project are working hard to continually improve the site and to offer new and exciting activities for everyone to enjoy, including the Cornfield Fest event which took place over three days in July 2022.

1   Connswater Community Greenway, Belfast
2   The Cornfield Project, Coleraine

Source: https://www.thecornfieldproject.co.uk/



2

**3   Cator Park, Greenwich, London**
**Multi-age access and closer to nature supporting existing and new communities**

Redevelopment of an urban brownfield site in southeast London once dominated by buildings and roads into an 8ha community park in collaboration with the London Wildlife Trust.

The new site includes 3,000m² of play space bringing families and communities together along with a diverse habitat mosaic, the new ponds, meadows and native hedging of which have helped the project achieve a 161% biodiversity net gain compared to the original site. The masterplan supports the network of Green Infrastructure beyond the site boundary and provides flooding mitigation measures. In recognition of its impact, the project has won the 'Sir David Attenborough Award for Enhancing Biodiversity' and the 'Overall President's Award' from the Landscape Institute.

Source:
https://governmentbusiness.co.uk/features/
investing-green-spaces-and-levelling-uk

**4   Greenspace Scotland**
**Transforming urban green spaces for people**

Greenspace Scotland are Scotland's parks and greenspace charity. Their activities mainly focus on helping to shape policy concerning greenspace as well as ensuring good practice in the delivery of greenspace. Since 2002 they have supported the development and improvement of greenspace across Scotland in the form of strategies, plans and outcomes; community placemaking; and funding and fundraising support, including prescribing green health.

Their Parks4Life fund was created in collaboration with MyParkScotland with the goal of creating a multi-million-pound sustainable endowment fund which will help to keep Scotland's treasured parks in good heart for future generations to enjoy. A grant from the National Lottery Heritage Fund means that every donation will be matched, up to £500,000. Once the fund reaches £1 million, communities and other groups will be able to apply to the Parks4Life fund for grants to support their park projects and activities.

Source: https://www.greenspacescotland.org.uk/


3


4

**5   Glan Morfa Community Woodland, Rhyl, North Wales**
**Community-led action delivering social and environmental benefits**

Glan Morfa in North Wales is a 27ha area located on a former landfill site adjacent to the town, about 5 minutes' walk from a large housing estate and in a ward ranked (at the time) as the most deprived in Wales. The local Residents Association successfully bid for a grant of over £250,000 to create community green space and woodland for relaxation and exercise. It has achieved several community benefits, including:

– Providing surrounding communities with access to a safe woodland environment where they could have a 'breath of fresh air', exercise, bird watch and learn about the natural surroundings.
– 7000m of high quality footpaths now link the site with other parts of the town & schools increasing the

number of people able to enjoy site.  5000m of cycle track was also provided. Tarmacking of paths made them less attractive to illegal motorcycle activity.
– The project created a focus for community action and cohesion through volunteering opportunities, with over 1000 people involved in some way.
– Local people underwent leadership training through the 'walk your way to health' initiative.
– Forest Education Initiative held several events with over 200 children attending and Forest School training has been undertaken.
– The project has benefited from having young people involved through training schemes for groups from the probation service and skills build course.
– Over 2500 new trees have been planted, many by community volunteers, and new habitats have been created to improve biodiversity.

Sources:
– Forest Research, Regeneration of previously developed land - Creating community forestry in Glan Morfa, Rhyl, North Wales
– Ciria open space, Case Studies, Glan Morfa Community Woodland - Social Benefits

3   Cator Park, Greenwich, London
4   Greenspace Scotland
5   Glan Morfa Community Woodland, Rhyl, North Wales


5


5

**6  Derry City and Strabane's Green Infrastructure Plan Action Plan supporting natural capital accounting of green and blue infrastructure**

Derry City and Strabane District Council (DCSDC) developed the first green infrastructure plan 2019-2032 and associated Action Plan in Northern Ireland, whose actions provide protection, improvement and increase of green and blue spaces. The two documents support a series of environmental, economic, recreational, health and well being benefits for the public.

The interconnected network of multifunctional green and blue spaces includes mostly vegetated areas, such as woodlands, public parks and allotments, and waterways such as rivers, canals, reservoirs and lakes.

The plans set a functional re-thinking of publicly owned green spaces, maximising functions provided and encouraging active use for exercise and recreation, raising people's awareness and supporting their health and wellbeing.

Strategies highlight that these areas provide a range of benefits including providing ecosystem services - essential benefits that people obtain from the environment - helping mitigate the impact of climate change, improving public parks, play areas, food growing opportunities and the development of greenways.

Source: Derry City and Strabane District Council, Green Infrastructure Plan 2019-2032 https://www.derrystrabane.com/GI


6

**7  Amsterdam, Netherlands Prioritising urban green space investment and integrated planning**

Amsterdam is one of the greenest cities in Europe, and the city government continues to invest in it in recognition of the value that green space holds for local people, and in response to challenges such as overcrowding, the changing demands of residents, and climate change. The city is also exemplary regarding data on green infrastructure, walking and cycling routes, and climate action.

The city's 'Green Infrastructure Vision' and 'Structural Vision Amsterdam 2040' imagine how Amsterdam, as a green and biodiverse city, will develop from now until 2040, setting out the city's strategy in relation to green space. These documents aim to create an integrated approach to urban planning, driving improvements for recreational green spaces, habitat areas, green corridors, flood risk management and climate resilience, renewable energy, and integrated transport networks.

The large areas of existing green space have gained additional functions for leisure, work, socialising, sports, play, celebration, and growing and learning about food. Amsterdam's green space initiatives range from small parks to city-wide projects to increase urban green spaces, improve quality of life for residents, and increase the attractiveness of the city to tourists.

Amsterdam has also placed a high priority on greening neighbourhoods, creating more green spaces and play areas. The foundation "Stichting Postzegelparken", founded in 2010, establishes parks on small dysfunctional plots, with residents living there being responsible for the management and maintenance. This initiative allows local people to spend more time with each other, with pride in the place they live.

The city is exemplary regarding data on green infrastructure, walking, cycling routes, and climate action.

Sources:
— City of Amsterdam, Policy: Green Space
— Oppla, Amsterdam - NBS for greening the city and increasing resilience
— ILA, Amsterdam and Urban Green Space Planning

5  Derry City & Strabane's Green Infrastructure, Northern Ireland
6  Amsterdam, Netherlands


7

# 2    Research

# 2.1 Ethnographic Study

**As part of the first-hand research undertaken for this project, an ethnographic study was conducted. It focussed on two urban parks - Glencairn Park and Valley Park, comparing public use of two parks and associated attitudes to these urban green spaces.**

The two parks were visited on three occasions between August and October 2022 – a weekday during the summer holidays, a weekday during term time and a Saturday. Information was gathered through observational use studies and conversational-style surveys, both with park users and non-park users within walking distance of the parks.

The two parks were selected as they are both in close proximity to high populations, have a number of similarities in landscape features/typography; yet they have had different levels of investment/development over the years. The ability to compare and contrast user levels and opinions was hoped to provide greater insight into what makes a successful park.

### Glencairn Park : Belfast City Council Park (32ha)

The park consists of woodland, river, rough meadows, mown lawns and a playpark. Though little infrastructural investment has been made at the site to date, it will form the end point for the new Forth Meadow Community Greenway as well as providing a link to current farmed land, recently acquired by National Trust with a view to opening up access to Divis & Black Mountain.



1

### Valley Park – Antrim Newtownabbey Borough Council Park. (64ha)

The park consists of woodland, river, pond, rough meadows, mown lawns, playparks, playing pitches, skate park, sculpture trail, dog park. It received almost 5 million euros from Peace III funding in 2015 and the Council has continued to invest in various aspects of the park. A community greenway is planned to go through the park in the near future.

### Observational Use Study

Valley Park has vastly higher visitor numbers compared with Glencairn Park. This is partly associated with the presence of a large number of pitches within Valley Park which result in both participants and spectators coming to use the site. There was also a Parkrun within Valley Park which had 128 runners present on one of the observation days. Glencairn does not have a Parkrun or playing pitches.

### Conversational Survey

Surveys were carried out in a conversational manner with details being digitally recorded. Generally, those who were prepared to stop and talk did so because they did use the park so had an interest in the topic, making it difficult to get a breadth of knowledges about barriers to the park use. Word clouds were produced on the basis of interviewers' answers.

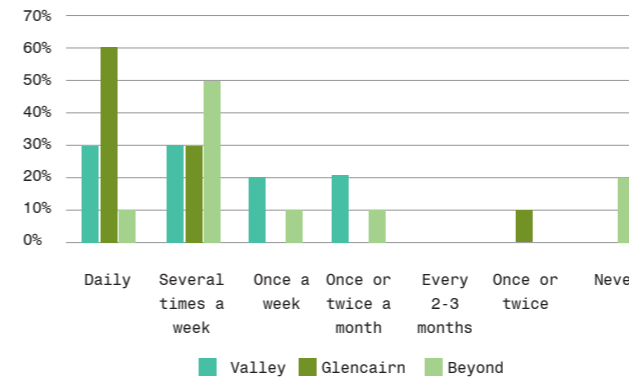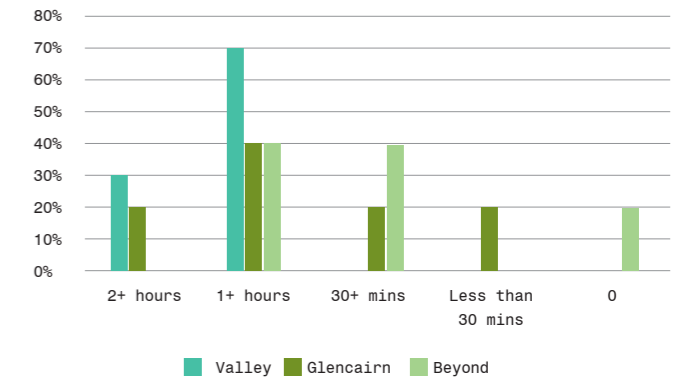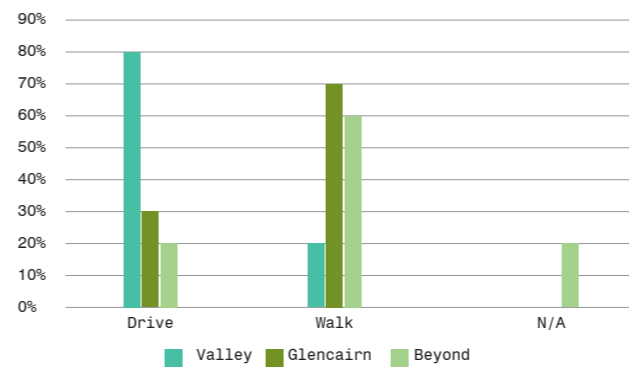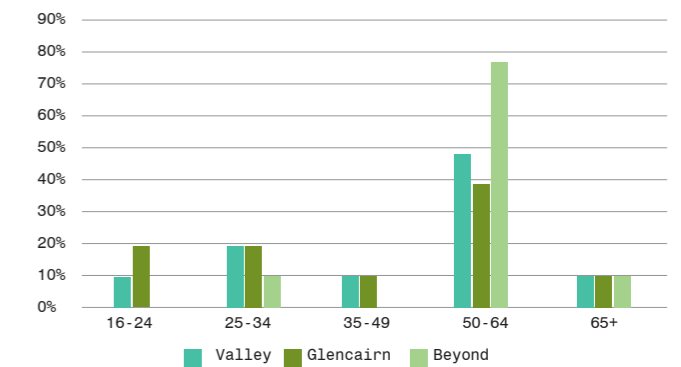For the full report refer to the Appendix F.



2


How often do you use the park?

How long do you stay in the park?

How do you generally get to the park?

Age bracket

3

''Think our greenspaces should be linked together better, creating long distance walking paths.''

''I think all green spaces make you feel closer to nature.''

"We generally go to parks as it is free. Indoor play areas can be very expensive…"

''There's a bit of a community. I've gained friendships.''

What makes a successful park? "Danger free. That would be the number one and then rubbish free".

"I think it's well kept. Clean and a good variety of things to do".

4

1 Glencairn Park photograph
2 Valley Park photograph
3 Key findings from the Ethnographic Study
4 Quotes from Conversational Survey

### Key Findings

– Animation of spaces e.g. through events or other types of programme, especially around children's playgrounds and outdoor sports activities, is a key factor in increasing people's access to urban green spaces.
– Age groups respond differently to activities on site. Parks offering occasions or events for outdoor sports are generally attractive to younger audiences. Equally, families and older groups are generally attracted by quieter places for respite and be together.
– Reliance on private means of transport, i.e. cars is a key factor influencing the parks' usage.

# 2.2 Stakeholder Engagement

**The Stakeholder Engagement approach encouraged a plurality of voices, collaborative listening and knowledge-sharing. Conversations invited organisation representatives across the public, governmental, charity and NGO, health, and business sectors, to understand gaps, opportunities, needs and aspirations across Northern Ireland.**

Two stakeholder engagement workshops took place in November and December 2022. Participants from various sectors attended, representing government and policy, health, community and charity, and businesses. Through mixed-sector groups, a set of diverse and wide-ranging conversations painted a portrait of current and future needs. Attendees were invited to join both workshops.

**Workshop 1: Developing a Vision**

The first workshop created a listening conversational space. Key professional bodies across Northern Ireland were invited to share their expertise, experience, ideas and intentions. A collaborative whiteboard provided a conversation space in three sections:

1 **Where are we now?**
   Understanding the current state of Urban Green Spaces in NI - what works well, what is lacking, and what each organisation's specific interest is.
2 **Where are we going?**
   Exploring priorities, gaps, and opportunities for improvement.
3 **How can we get there?**
   Honing in on how change can be created, supported, and fast-tracked.

**Outline Vision**

The trends, patterns, and anomalies from Workshop 1 were analysed and drawn into an emerging outline Vision built on the key priorities and principles discussed. An overarching theme and three pillars were identified, each with ten key points.

1  Workshop Attendees Overview
2  Screenshots of Stakeholder Workshop 1 online conversations to indicate many views being captured

**Workshop 2: Testing our Vision**

The second workshop presented the outline Vision to the participants for testing and critique. Participants were asked to vote on importance of the principles presented. The results were collected live and discussed in small groups, identifying gaps or anomalies. At the end of the session, participants were asked to provide key words for integration in the drafted Vision Statement.

**Attendees and Interest**

The diagram below analyses attendance to the workshops from each sector. The largest interest came from local councils (35%) of which there was a good spread across towns, boroughs and departments. An equally large interest came from Voluntary, Community, and Social Enterprises (32%). Council and VCSE sectors seem already actively engaged in these issues, and would form natural leads for future steering groups.

Health and Public Sector attendees (combined 15%) were under-represented and individual meetings were arranged to ensure every sector was equally represented and listened to thoroughly.

The large attendance of Interested individuals (11%) denotes a wider enthusiasm for urban green spaces within the national population. The attendees' diversity (varying groups and different ages) indicates the need of individuals for a larger representation.

Both workshops offered the opportunity to co-design the Vision, allowing participants to set the agenda for their organisation or interest and proactively convey common priorities. Sessions have been key moments to test ideas in groups, and refine a collaborative Vision.

For the full Analysis of Stakeholder Workshops refer to Appendix C.



1
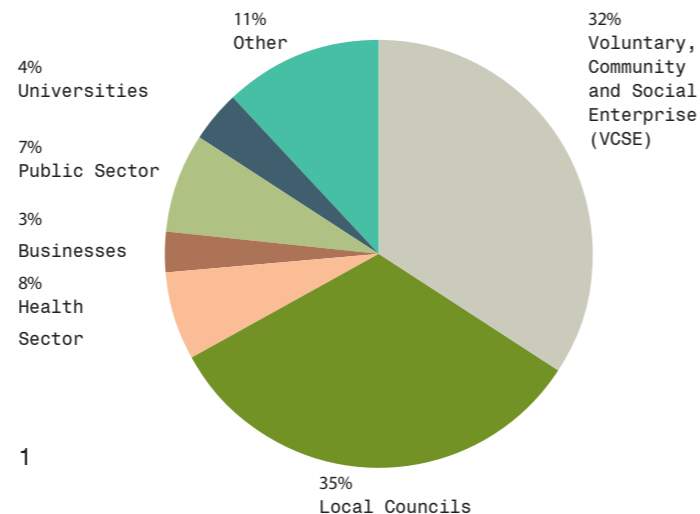
**Workshop 1 Key Findings**

– Promoting and linking nature to health benefits and climate adaptation. Education and research departments could help to communicate these benefits.
– More joined up approach is needed. Partnerships and collaborations between different sectors will help create more coherent strategies and legislation. Opportunities for forums and networks towards social cohesion.
– The need for integration of different policies, aspects, and networks to reduce the SILO approach that is currently very common in Northern Ireland.
– Lack of long-term thinking in management and funding.
– More active and inclusive community engagement is needed to foster sense of ownership and safety.
– The analysis of the participants' comments led to the consolidation of three broader themes: climate and biodiversity, community and wellbeing, and access and inclusivity which formed the basis for the Vision.

**Workshop 2 Key Findings**

– Knowledge sharing and sense of ownership are key to promote local community engagement, in particular in the management of green spaces.
– Food growing is a key opportunity that requires training and up-skilling.
– Health sector and education should be involved in a more integrated long term planning.
– Access for all is a key priority. A multi-benefit holistic vision goes hand in hand with animated spaces, accessible and safe for all.
– Focus on nature-based solutions connecting green and blue infrastructure in a coherent strategy.
– Enhanced strategies that consider rewilding and wildlife management for increase in urban biodiversity.
– Communication of ecological and health benefits is key to support the use and attitude to urban green spaces.
– Increased collaboration between existing networks as well as across different sectors is a priority for an integrated strategy.



2

# 2.3 Public Engagement

**The 'My Place' Engagement sessions offered the opportunity to engage with community representatives and members of schools, supporting their knowledge-sharing through a series of activities and direct analysis of selected local amenities. Conversations aimed to set the ground for current short-term improvements and holistic long-term strategies around urban green spaces.**

As part of the project's research process for the Future of Urban Green Spaces in Northern Ireland, six community and youth 'My Place' engagement sessions were undertaken during November and December 2022. This enabled a more in depth focus on people's experience of four parks located across the region in three different council areas.

- **Ballymoney Riverside Park, Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council -** In 2015 Riverside Park was designated a Local Nature Reserve (LNR), supporting the creation of a wetland floodplain, with the use of specialist biodiversity planting, river channels supporting the native fish population and native planted woodland areas.
- **Dungannon Park, Mid Ulster District Council -** recipient of 2022 Green Flag Award, set over 70 acres and includes traditional open green spaces, athletic pitches, forested areas, with a waterfall and a large lake used for trout fishing. The park also benefits from an allotment, a small orchard and herb gardens.
- **Railway Park, Mid Ulster District Council -** provides a linear well-lit pathway along the former railway line with a small play park
- **V36, Valley Park, Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council -** provides sports facilities, a civic linear park including event spaces, open space, scenic walking routes and installations of both public and community art, a children's adventure play area, which includes a wheelchair accessible swing, a skate park and picnic area. The wider Valley Park is home to walking and running trails and events, a duck pond with a viewing deck and a self-contained dog park.

Community and youth representatives from the following groups, secondary and primary schools, were invited to participate and share their comments and ideas on the future of urban green spaces:
- Ballymoney Friendship and Walking Group
- Ballymoney High School
- Willowbank Community, The Junction, Dungannon
- St Patrick's College, Dungannon
- Newtownabbey Arts and Cultural Network
- Rathcoole Primary School, Newtownabbey

The accessible and participatory 'My Place' game was utilised to generate conversation and to encourage participants to consider both the positive and negative aspects of the parks. Each group was asked to discuss and rate the associated park against different place criteria such as public transport, sense of safety, activities and facilities.

A total of 86 participants overall discussed and advanced suggestions as to how these spaces could be improved and agreed and prioritised key improvements.

At each session, participants were asked at the beginning to consider 'Why are Urban Green Spaces important to you?', while at each session they were invited to share their comments on 'What would make you want to use parks and green spaces in the future?'. The session's answers were recorded by word clouds and post-it exercises, diagrams and boards.

In addition to these engagement sessions, a student from the Chinese Welfare Association undertook a study on the current use of the public green spaces and priorities for ethnic minority groups living in Belfast.

For the full reports of the Public Engagement sessions and Ethnic Minority Study refer to Appendix D.

1 Ballymoney Riverside Park, Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council
2 Dungannon Park, Mid Ulster District Council
3 Participants from St Patrick's College, Dungannon
4 Participatory Game Session
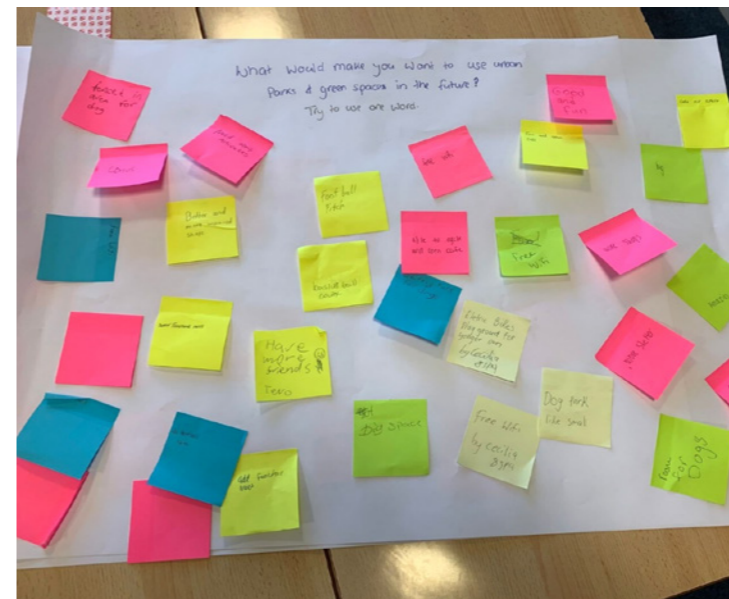5 One of the 'Post-It Exercise' boards


1


2


3


4


5

**Key Findings**
- The value of urban green spaces and their importance in offering affordable access to nature and healthcare benefits, is widely recognised between different age groups and community representatives.
- Relevant family-oriented activities, different types of play for all ages, and accessibility seem to be effective attractors for users.
- Lack of maintenance, security at dusk/night time, and appropriate shop/food and beverage facilities are largely recognised as parks' negatives. Anti-social behaviours, particularly connected to alcohol abuse, have also been widely highlighted.
- Lack of shelter and toilets raised as a priority issue by nearly all the groups.
- Kids expressed the lack in play equipment and adequate facilities, as well as the desire for natural forms of play in relation to trees.
- Seasonal activities and occasional events can help animate the space during spring and summer months and ensure safety. There was a high interest in participating in such events with family and friends.
- Parks and green pathways should be accessible for all and cater for different ages, including teenagers which feel the need for more social and physical activities in the parks.
- Architectural features from different cultures help some ethnic groups feel more comfortable.

# 2.4 Public Survey

**A survey was undertaken from November 2022 to December 2022 as part of the public engagement activities.**

The aim of the survey was to gain a wide range of stakeholder views on their personal experience of using their local urban green space (as opposed to representing an organisation). 536 people responded to the survey from across Northern Ireland, with the largest concentration unsurprisingly in Belfast.

**Access**
- One third of respondents visit their local UGS several times a week. The closer the individual lived to the urban green space the more frequently they visited it.
- Over half of respondents live within a 10-minute walk of an UGS.
- 36% of respondents have to drive to get to their local UGS.

**Uses**
- Physical health is the main use of urban green spaces (generally easy and moderate effort physical activities).
- Mental health second most important with enjoyment of nature and wildlife
- Finally, dog walking was also mentioned amongst the popular uses.

**Barriers**
- 'Lack of time' (which this project may find difficult to influence – but indicates people would like to go more often if they could).
- 'Lack of quality green space'.

**Views on the current state**
- There were lots of very positive responses about the current state of UGS; it makes their area a great place to live. It allows people to explore nature on their doorstep, improves their quality of life and is somewhere people can relax and unwind, and do exercise or physical activity, and provides a place to meet others from the community and space for children to play.
- Over half of respondents said their UGS promotes good relations between communities.
- The two most negative views were feeling of safety during the evening/night time and anti-social behaviour.

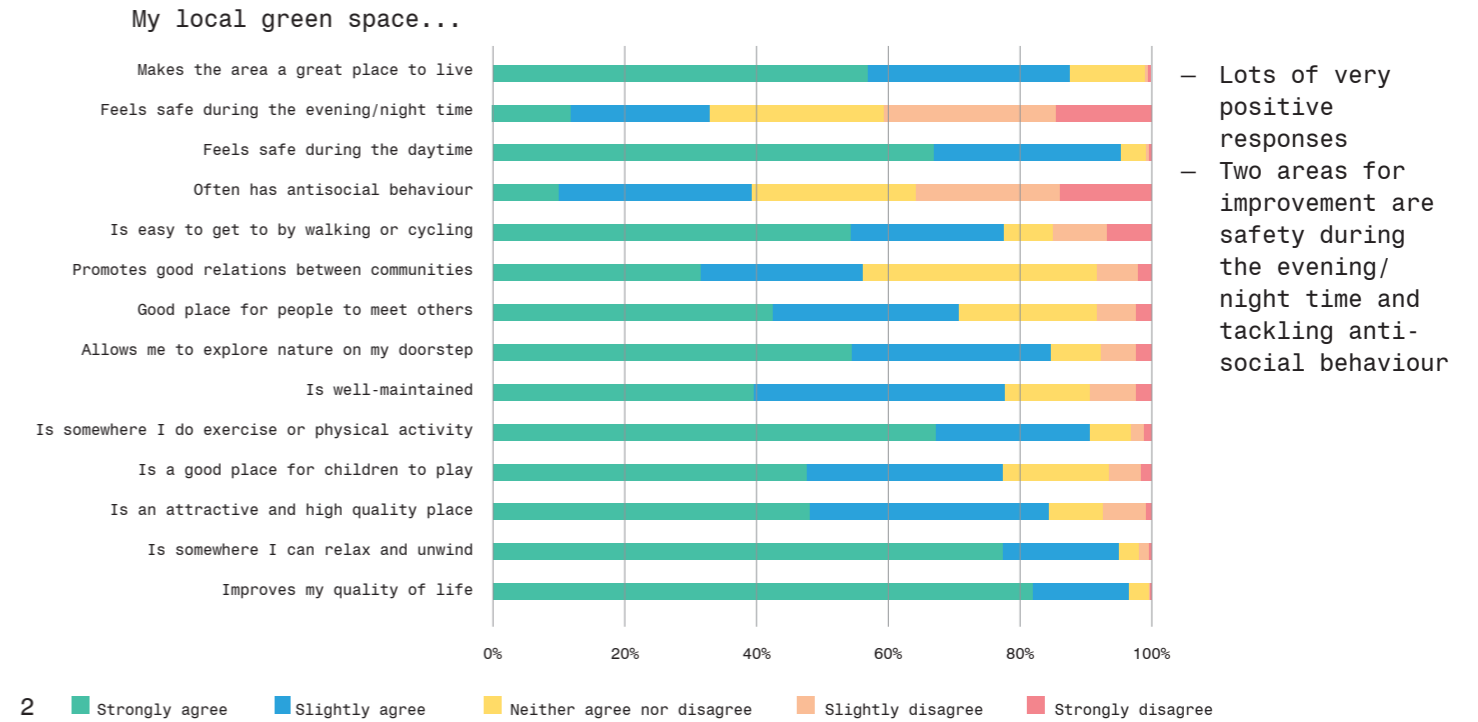A copy of the survey questions and results can be found in the Appendix E.
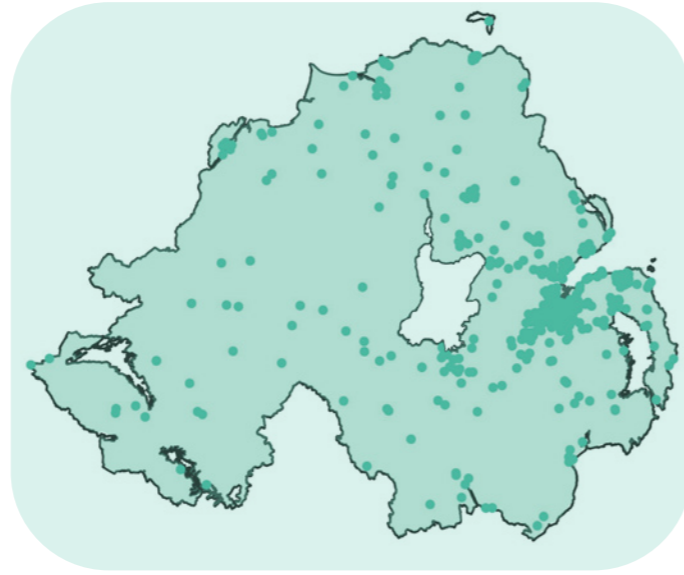


1

1  Survey respondents location
2  Survey response summary - current state of urban green spaces
3  Survey response summary - future of urban green spaces

**Key Findings**

- Even distribution of urban green spaces is key to their everyday use, allowing people to explore nature near their doorsteps.
- Walking distance from urban green spaces and public means of transport affect the number of visits to local green spaces.
- Most participants acknowledge the wellbeing benefits in accessing nature and wildlife. There is a high interest in using local green spaces and supporting biodiversity.
- Safety and evening/night-time activation are key for encouraging wider use.

## Current state of urban green spaces
**How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement?**

My local green space...



— Lots of very positive responses
— Two areas for improvement are safety during the evening/ night time and tackling anti-social behaviour

2  ■ Strongly agree  ■ Slightly agree  ■ Neither agree nor disagree  ■ Slightly disagree  ■ Strongly disagree

## Future of urban green spaces
**What are your priorities for the future of urban green spaces in Northern Ireland?**
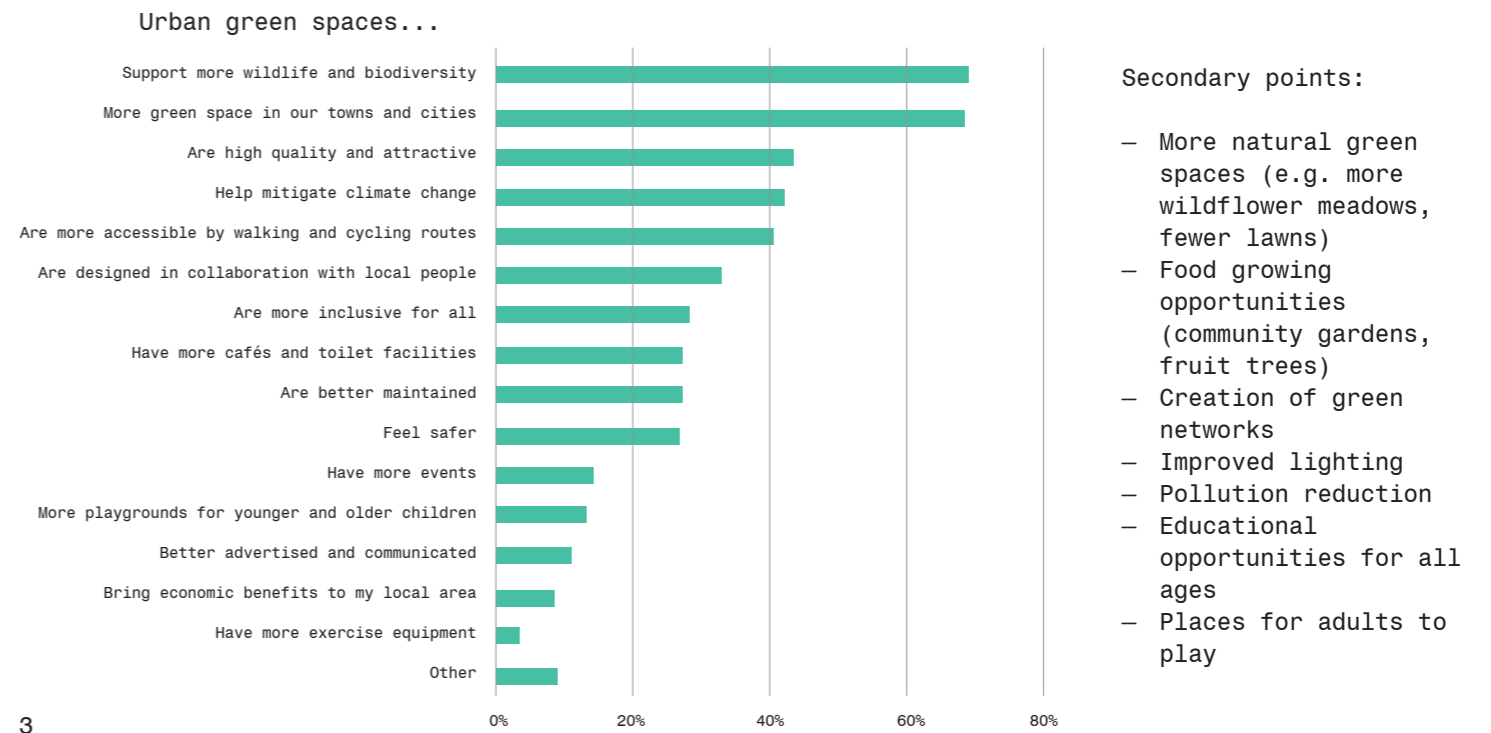
Urban green spaces...



Secondary points:

- More natural green spaces (e.g. more wildflower meadows, fewer lawns)
- Food growing opportunities (community gardens, fruit trees)
- Creation of green networks
- Improved lighting
- Pollution reduction
- Educational opportunities for all ages
- Places for adults to play

3

# 3    Vision

# 3.1 Co-Creating a Vision

**The wealth of information compiled and analysed during the research process enabled the project team to frame a collaborative future Vision for Northern Ireland's urban green spaces.**

**The Vision comprises a large-scale encapsulating agenda - the Overarching Aim - under which sit three thematic pillars. These were derived and distilled from the common themes raised during the engagement workshops, tested iteratively and refined through the Stakeholder Workshops.**

**Vision Statement**

The Vision Statement is an outcome of the Stakeholder Workshops and summarises the main targets for the future of Northern Ireland's urban green spaces. This emerged through collaborative word clouds to determine key words, and a poll.

**Overarching Aim & Pillars**

The following pages outline the Vision's Overarching Aim and three Pillars.

The Overarching Aim is to unite and develop a much more joined-up approach towards urban green spaces. This looks to bind together multiple targets, groups, projects, and initiatives to better support one another. Integration is at the core.

Beneath this, the three thematic Pillars are inter-connected, capturing the multi-dimensional nature of future benefits.

Key ecological, health, and social benefits of the urban green spaces, the urgency to respond to current health and climate crises, as well as the need for more socially-cohesive and safe-for-all green areas have driven the themes and future targets analysed over the following pages.

The following pages comprise:
– a short description of the Overarching Aim and each of the Three Pillars,
– three to four principles. These have been identified through the stakeholder engagement and participants' critique,
– further guidelines that sit below these principles. These have also been identified through the stakeholder engagement process and public insights
– a 'Could We...' box that suggests possible implementation projects. These are not exhaustive, but a starting point to move towards implementation. Please refer to the Routemap & Action Plan for the further implementation strategy.

1



**Vision**

'Imagine a future where our urban green spaces are key community assets, connecting people, enhancing nature, and helping towns & cities adapt to climate change'

**Statement**

**Overarching Aim**

A Joined-up Approach

**Pillars**

Community and Wellbeing

Access and Inclusivity

Climate and Biodiversity

1 Vision structure diagram
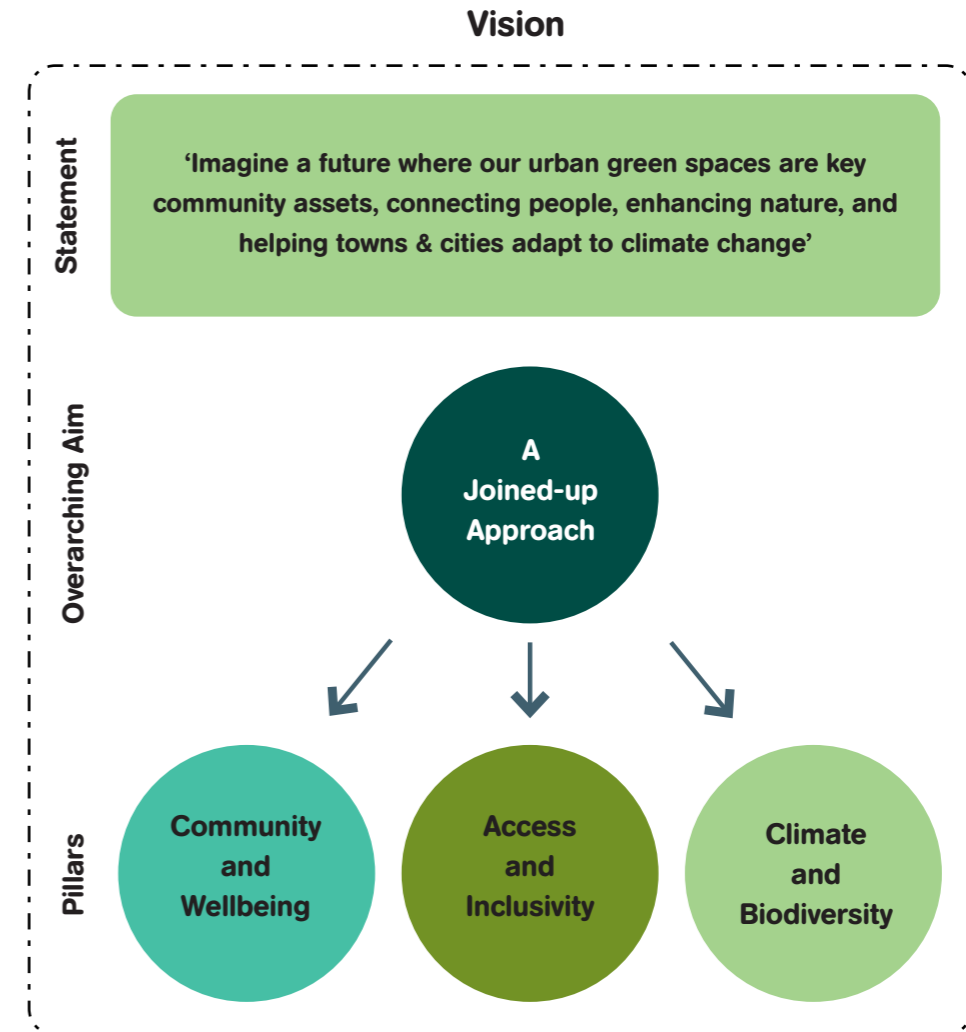
# 3.2 The Vision: A Joined-up Approach



**Integration is paramount to Northern Ireland's future vision. Across the country, thousands of people are working towards a similar goal yet often remain disconnected from one another. Working together, we can propel small initiatives into national models, grow seed-funds into regular financial support, and consider multiple needs simultaneously. Knowledge-sharing, common agendas, interdisciplinary collaborations, and cross-sector communications all look towards a joined-up way of working. A 'Joined-up Approach' looks to tackle the great issues of our era together, to deliver multiple outcomes for the people, environment, and economy of Northern Ireland.**

**Key Principles:**

## 1    Benefit Assessment & Advocacy



We need to continually acknowledge and assess the public benefits of urban green space. Economic value encompasses health, wellbeing, ecology, as well as social and environmental issues. Different audiences put 'value' in different places. Having readily available comprehensive and easily communitcated data allows us to understand outcomes of investments, demonstrate the value of urban green spaces for everyone, and is key to driving informed decision making. Education and advocacy is crucial in growing support and engagement with the importance of urban green spaces across Northern Ireland.

## 2    Balancing People and Wildlife



We must equally consider the social and natural aspects of urban green spaces, in line with Doughnut Economics principles. Wildlife or Nature Reserve areas supporting biodiversity, SuDS functions and climatic regulation must be strategically balanced with areas of amenity, play, sports and tourism across our towns and cities. Together, this can provide a set of holistic conditions to set circular economies for sustainable environmental as well as community development.

## 3    Cross-Sector Collaboration
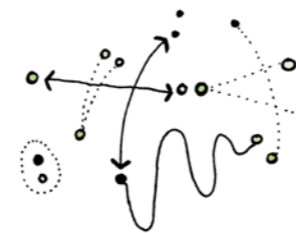


Nature-based solutions must span seamlessly across social, health, environment and climate sectors. Cooperation, shared resources and approaches must be utilised to connect agendas, targets and projects - across sectors, disciplines and boroughs.

## 4    Co-Design and Co-Management
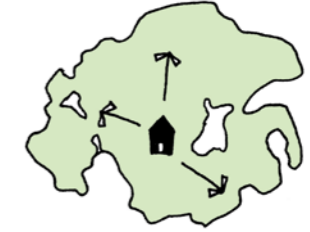


Local community groups, councils, private management companies, and environmental organisations need to work together to plan and manage NI's green spaces. A sense of ownership is crucial for community groups and individuals to feel part of their local spaces. Tapping into local knowledge and skill-sharing can tighten relationships between green space, education and employment.

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### Guidelines

As part of a joined-up approach, integrated urban strategies should look towards:
– Delivering conservation at a landscape scale
– A sustainable repurposing of town and city centres that support placemaking and pride of place
– Adoption of the '15 minute city' neighbourhood concept - where all daily needs are reachable within a fifteen minute walking or cycling distance
– Dedicated training on shared management strategies
– Support strategies to lower skill-gaps

### Could We...
– Create an open-access data-sharing platform that collates both quantitative and experienced green space benefits
– Invite key stakeholders (health trusts, wildlife agencies, flood alleviation bodies) to contribute to open data sharing on the value of green and blue spaces
– Forefront local skill-sharing initiatives
– Regularly bring together local council members across sectors to share best practice
– Form a dedicated cross-disciplinary steering group for Northern Ireland's urban green spaces
– Create an interactive 'tree story map' of Northern Ireland, encouraging local school children to participate
– Set up a common approach to actively assess and monitor the quality of every urban green space and what ongoing management is required. Particular support needed around tackling anti-social behaviour
– Use the collectively collated data to target funding and pool funding initiatives

# 3.3 Pillar 1: Community and Wellbeing



**A good standard of health and wellbeing should be a basic human right across Northern Ireland's urban neighbourhoods, and green spaces can help radically improve this for all. The first Vision Pillar addresses how we can maximise health benefits (both physical and mental) by ensuring our green spaces are grown from bottom-up as well as from top-down, and that they are welcoming, active and loved as a central part of our everyday lives.**

**Key Principles:**

## 1    Community Management



Building relationships with and between local communities is vital in empowering a sense of ownership, pride in place, and care towards local urban green spaces. This applies both on a daily basis and across generations. Knowledge- and experience-sharing between community groups will help nurture successful approaches, building an understanding of what works where for who. Such an approach is also key for understanding what does not work where and who is being left out. Community management must specifically target non-standard groups.

## 2    Active for All



To fully tap into the enormous health and wellbeing value of urban green spaces, social cohesion is crucial. Animation of green spaces through programming and events transform spaces in terms of perceived accessibility and inclusivity. Targeted priorities should be mapped, monitored and developed with park users and non-users, including sports and physical activity initiatives such as park runs and walking groups; alongside physical interventions such as multi-generational programming. This looks towards increasingly positive and animated attitude shifts towards urban green spaces.

## 3    Integrated Neighbourhood Planning



Integrated community engagement is a vital part of the design and delivery of projects, reaching far beyond consultation alone. Community groups and individuals should be integrated into the formulating, shaping and implementation of Local and Neighbourhood Plans. Spokespeople should include multiple voices from all ages, backgrounds and demographics, nurturing existing local partnerships and reading across existing policies.

## 4    Education across Generations



Integrating urban green spaces within nurseries, schools, colleges and universities is as important as linking them with old people homes, care centres and rehabilitation units. Nature-led education is a lifelong endeavour and plays a core role in how green spaces are perceived and engaged with. This can be done through physical locations, growing initiatives, curriculums, trips and training programmes.

## Guidelines

As part of the community and wellbeing vision, socially-led strategies and projects should look towards:
– Recognition, development and advocacy of the work done to date on the health benefits of green spaces, particularly post COVID-19
– Health prescriptions and social prescribing
– Focus on food growing spaces, programmes and allotments, as tools for education, local production, wellbeing and self-empowerment, and for social engagement across generations
– Support small-scale attitude-orientated gestures, to in turn, grow larger engagement bodies

### Could We…
– Create local planning forum groups, involving voices from 8 years to 88 years
– Conduct a research study to identify local groups not currently using green spaces, and develop specific projects for them
– Spread the word about Healthy Living Centres and the health benefits of green space
– Ensure every resident in Northern Ireland has equal opportunity to an allotment within 15-minutes walk from their home
– Review of current facilities through more detailed local surveys
– Invest in facilities that can generate income to help fund the parks such as cafe, shelter, occasional events
– Provide better multi-age playspaces
– Provide sheltered spaces and benches
– Build governance structures for all local green spaces, i.e. friends groups who can advocate, engage, identify improvements and support activity programmes
– Offer training to empower people to grow food, undertake surveys, and practical conservation works
– Ensure a wide range of events/activities in urban green spaces to increase inclusion and attract new audiences

# 3.4  Pillar 2: Access and Inclusivity



One of the biggest problems with Northern Ireland's urban green spaces is people's ability to get to them quickly and easily on a day-to-day basis. Similarly, some groups can be unintentionally excluded as they feel there is nothing for them when they get there. The second Vision Pillar addresses accessibility and connectivity, supporting urban green spaces across the country, for everyone.

**Key Principles:**

## 1    Access for All



Our urban green spaces should be inclusive and welcoming to everyone - advocating environmental justice across age groups, backgrounds and cultures; acknowledging all abilities, needs and tastes; and considering locals as well as national and international visitors. This includes improvements to public transport in parallel with the programming of green spaces, providing both the ability to get there and a reason to do so. This is particularly crucial in peripheral city and town areas.

## 2    Active Travel



Improving cycle and pedestrian routes will be crucial to ingraining urban green spaces into daily movement networks, as well as improving physical health and reducing carbon emissions. This includes strengthening links in and between urban areas; identifying and bolstering designated routes and trails; and securing pedestrian priority routes. A holistic vision for good street design should include SuDS and other green elements as well as cross-generational use and active transport - taking a multiplex approach to the design of public open space.

## 3    Green Connectivity
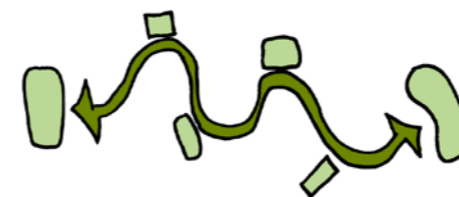


Connecting green spaces through greenways, linear parks, green streets and swales looks towards an interconnected green network across our towns and cities. A perceived wider vision of a single connected green infrastructure looks beyond the perception of single individual spaces. A crucial part of green connectivity includes improving public access to existing spaces, and allowing free movement between spaces by working together with landowners.

### Guidelines

As part of the access and inclusivity vision, nature-led strategies and projects also look towards:
– Compiling an in-depth understanding of current perceptions around safety and isolation, particularly around gender differences
– Safety by design, tackling anti-social behaviour through methods such as Community Safety Partnership
– Collaboration between government departments to better connect public transport with parks

### Could We...
– Conduct a detailed study of which specific groups use which specific spaces
– Collaborate between boroughs and local councils to strengthen pedestrian priority routes and designated cycle paths toward a coherent active travel network of greenways within the towns and cities
– Support tactical micro-greening projects to make links between community parks
– Ensure every resident in Northern Ireland has equal opportunity to a green space within 15-minutes walk from their home
– Develop a website or social media profile to raise awareness about fantastic urban green spaces in Northern Ireland and how to get there
– Focus on safety, in particular during night time, improving lighting and activity
– Work with Translink to provide better access at key times
– Ensure every green space has sufficient cycle parking
– Provide cycle hiring facilities
– Look at provision of green routes between schools and local green spaces

# 3.5 Pillar 3: Climate and Biodiversity



Nature-based solutions will be crucial in creating a climatic-responsive future for Northern Ireland, that serves all species. The third Vision Pillar addresses future environmental, climatic and ecological needs. This includes flood alleviation, shading, habitat creation, tree equity, green space management and environmental education. Urban green spaces will play a key role in removing carbon emissions from the atmosphere and storing carbon in vegetation and soil.

**Key Principles:**

### 1    Green - Blue Networks

A comprehensive green-blue infrastructure network looks to balance ecological and environmental needs, such as connecting biodiversity gain with long-term flood management (as part of the Joined-up Approach). This develops existing green spaces including wetlands and flood areas, parks and pocket parks, greenways and green corridors, SuDS, coastal sites, green roofs, terraces and meanwhile sites. Connecting green and blue functions will form a vital driver across strategy-making, design and management.

### 2    Urban Biodiversity and Nature Recovery

A holistic nature-led response to the climate emergency seeks to enhance the relationship between ecological and rewilding areas, with managed spaces. To do this, we need to understand natural needs, ecological processes and soil impacts. We particularly look towards increased habitat creation, tree coverage, and the regeneration of brownfield sites.

### 3    Long Term Thinking
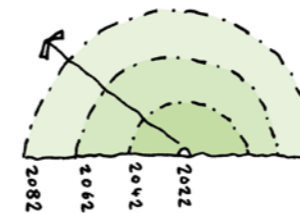
Through long-term management strategies, we look to cultivate different ways of thinking about and interacting with urban green spaces, and move towards more regenerative practices. This allows us to plan for and adapt to climatic shifts. Dedicated training on conservation and management seeks to support this across private green spaces and gardens as well as those that are public.

## Guidelines

As part of the climate and biodiversity vision, projects and strategies also look towards:
– Targeted biodiversity monitoring and public data-sharing
– Sustainable urban food forests and food provision
– Providing urban shading to mitigate against the urban heat island effect, and expected risks in summer temperatures due to climate change
– Demonstrate the link between urban green spaces, tree planting and urban air quality
– Linking up action for climate and biodiversity through urban local Nature Recovery Networks (NRNs).
– Implementing regenerative design principles, where the built environment has a net positive impact on natural systems.

## Could We...

– Run conservation and education workshops at local green spaces for people of all ages and backgrounds including schools
– Develop ZSL's 'Rewilding our Cities' programme
– Encourage good management through piloting programmes demonstrating grass cutting regime and pruning that enable biodiversity to thrive
– Involve research on soil impact on biodiversity to inform the park management and maintenance process
– Provide more comprehensive maps of biodiversity baseline and target improvements by habitat and species to help guide management strategies as part of local nature recovery networks
– Provide detailed maps of flood risk and set out plans for interventions in parks to reduce wider flood risk including costing the plans and assessing the benefits
– Further develop and better integrate Living with Water programme
– Map clean air zones and show how parks contribute to better air quality

# 4    Routemap

# 4.1 Overview of the Routemap

**To help drive implementation of the Vision and support it to become a reality, a Routemap has developed through a co-design process. The Routemap should be viewed as an "invitation to collaborate" to take the Vision forward. It provides a guide for which activities need to take place, not a definitive list, recognising it will evolve over time.**

The two main components of the Routemap are:

– **Enablers:** Enablers are activities that need to happen to support achievement of the Vision.
– **Pilot Projects:** Pilot projects are ideas and suggestions for physical urban green space investment and improvement projects that test out the Vision.



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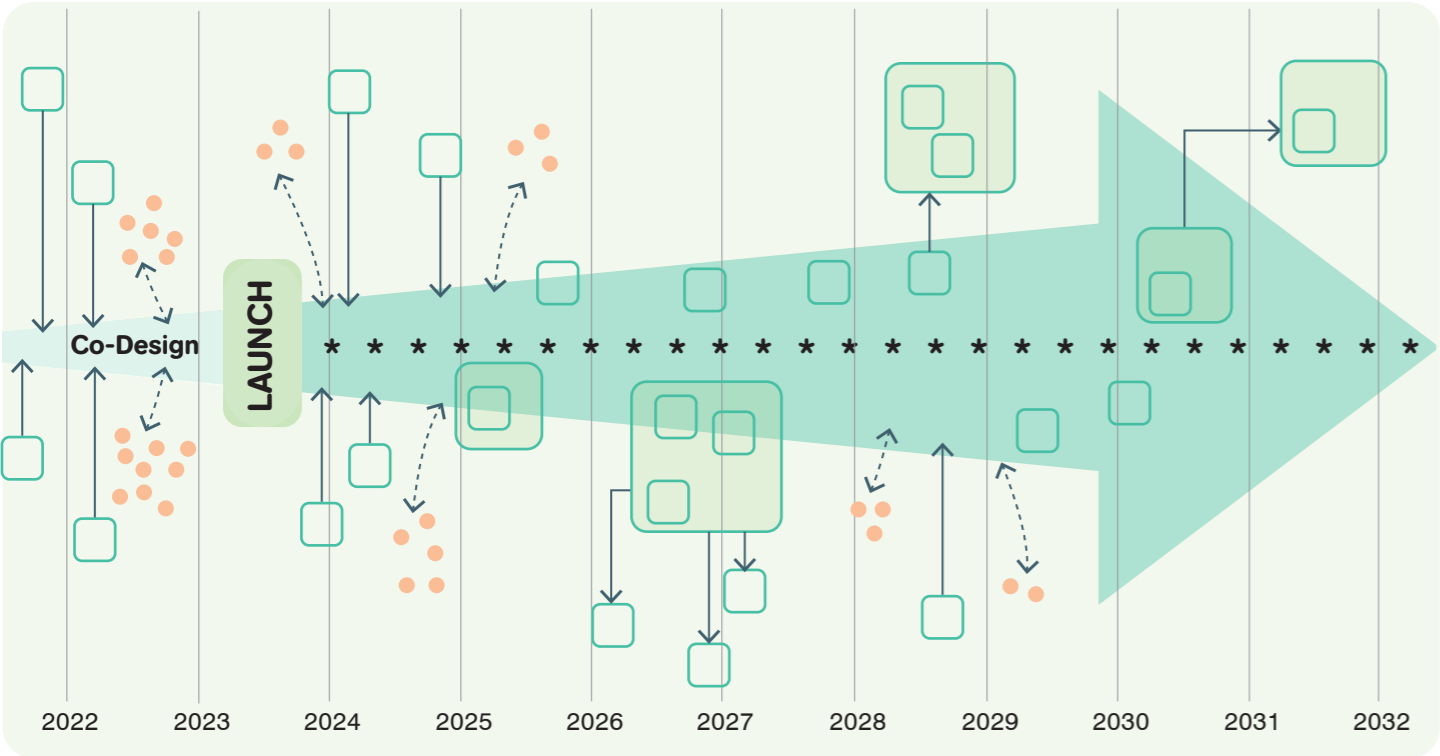
The above diagram illustrates how the project will gain momentum over time. It will connect, bolster and grow existing projects as well as generate new ones, continuing to connect with many individuals and groups. Pilot projects will inform bigger models, both within this project umbrella and externally.

1  Routemap diagram

**Key**

| | |
|---|---|
| ▮ | Enablers |
| ★ | Quarterly Forum |
| ▢ | Pilot Project |
| ▣ | Model or Method |
| ● | Individual or Group |

**Enablers Overview**

The Routemap establishes five key '**enablers**' to focus efforts on, recognising that this is a journey of many paths.  The five enablers are:

1.  Leadership, coordination and communications
2.  Funding and investment
3.  Involvement of local people
4.  Knowledge, skills and capacity
5.  Policy and planning

For each of the five enabling themes, an indicative action plan has been developed for the following timeframes:

–  Immediate actions (May-Dec 2023)
–  Short-term actions (2024-2025)
–  Long-term actions (2026-2030)

Whilst the action plan spans 2023-2030, our Vision looks much further ahead, to 2040 and 2050.

To achieve this Vision, we recognise we need involvement and collaboration from a wide range of stakeholders.  As such, for each enabler, we highlight which stakeholder groups should be most involved in delivery. The stakeholder groups are:

–  NI UGS programme leaders (e.g. the organisation or partnership who will lead the Vision implementation)
–  NI Executive (particularly Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, Department for Infrastructure, Department of Health, Department for Communities), Health and Social Care Trusts, Public Health Agency
–  Local Authorities
–  Private sector – developers, land owners, urban designers, local businesses
–  Third sector organisations (environmental, social and economic) – NGOS, charities, think tanks, industry institutes, foundations and networks
–  Residents, community and interest groups
–  Universities, colleges and schools

From these stakeholder groups, specific leaders, delivery partners and wider stakeholders have been identified who want to collaborate in the project to achieve ambitious and lasting change for people, and places.

**Pilot Projects Overview**

We have identified a selection of potential pilot projects (physical urban green space investment or improvement projects) to help spark ideas and invite stakeholders to test out new and innovative ways of designing, delivering and managing urban green space projects in line with the Vision.

These are highlighted on page 64.  They are based on the Vision principles, and capture the essence of many of the "Could we" text boxes from the Vision section.

**Measuring Success**

This Routemap also includes a section on measures of success – how we will measure whether the Routemap is being successfully implemented and the Vision is being achieved. We have set out our intended outcomes over the short, medium and long term, on pages 66-67.

**Alignment with Programme for Government Outcomes**

To help build the case for increasing investment in urban green space, we have also demonstrated how the urban green space agenda aligns to, and helps achieve, each of the Draft Programme for Government Outcomes. Clearly articulating the benefits that urban green spaces contribute to the region's wider social, economic and environmental goals demonstrates and underlines the multiple outcomes and added value which can be achieved by appropriate investment in urban green spaces (see page 62).

**Methodology**

The Routemap has been informed by:

–  The initial brief for this work.
–  Insights gathered during the Autumn 2022 Vision co-design workshops.
–  The 'Routemap and action plan' co-design workshop held in February 2023, which was attended by 40 stakeholders.
–  Future Parks Accelerator priorities and National Lottery Heritage Fund priorities (as potential future funding sources).
–  Published reports and guidance related to the enablers.
–  Stakeholder feedback April 2023.

# 4.2 Leadership, Coordination and Communications

**To take forward the action plan, we need an overarching organisation or partnership to provide leadership, coordination and communications.**

As evidenced through this project, there are many stakeholders who are interested in the value of urban green space and how NI can raise this the profile of this topic higher up the political, professional and societal agenda, to deliver the multiple outcomes in the Vision. We need an organisation(s) that can build the momentum around this subject and bring together leaders, delivery partners and investors who want to collaborate in the project to achieve ambitious and lasting change for people and places. It is recognised that partnership working might unlock extra funding opportunities.

There are multiple stakeholders doing great work, but often in silos, and it tends to be uncoordinated and not communicated particularly well. To achieve the Vision most effectively, we need improved collaboration and coherence between different sectors, and the various groups and forums that already exist. We also see value in creating a new quarterly Urban Green Space Forum, for stakeholders to share what they're doing, learn, and identify opportunities for collaboration. See the text box for more detail.

A large part of this theme will be amplifying and building on the existing organisations and partnerships working on Northern Ireland's urban green spaces at different scales, coordinating action, overseeing delivery of the action plan, and monitoring success.

Another key element is communication and advocacy. This encompasses both communication of this project, but also all the great work on urban green space that has happened (or is happening) in NI, and raising awareness about the value of urban green space. We will seek to identify influential leaders (from the public, private and third sector) to champion and advocate for the urban green space agenda at the highest levels.

We also need representation in UK-wide forums and strategic activity related to urban green space, with Northern Ireland's voice at the table. A key issue that has been raised through the consultation process is that there is a lack of awareness of where urban green spaces are located. Outdoor Recreation NI (ORNI) is currently developing a Green Space Map funded by NIEA for Northern Ireland, which will show all off-road trails and accessible greens space open to the public.[1]

1 Outdoor Recreation Nortern Ireland, 2022

The Green Space Map will help achieve a strategic and joined-up approach to planning, developing, and connecting green infrastructure – ensuring that more communities can connect with high quality open space and natural environments. The lead organisation(s) will help communicate and raise awareness of the Green Space Map once launched.

## Quarterly Urban Green Space Forum

The lead organisation/partnership would organise a quarterly NI urban green space forum, for stakeholders who want to collaborate to deliver this vision and achieve ambitious and lasting change for people, and places. There has been significant stakeholder interest in this project, and we want to build on this and maintain momentum.

We have considered the value proposition to encourage stakeholders to attend. We recommend the forum is framed as an opportunity for urban green space stakeholders to come together on a learning journey, and to support a joined-up approach. The purpose of the quarterly urban green space forum will be:
– Update and learn about the pilot projects.
– Update cross-sector stakeholders on progress against the action plan.
– A learning journey: sharing of new insights, knowledge, best practice guidance, skills, case studies (nationally and internationally) from guest speakers.
– Identify and activate working groups (these will emerge from the forum, but they might support funding applications, develop concepts for pilot projects or innovation programmes, produce mini reports on case studies, or guidance documents).
– Identify opportunities for collaboration and innovation amongst stakeholders. The Forum could enable small projects to know what one another are doing so they could, for example, join up and collaborate on a larger project.
– Make links with other forums and activity related activity (supporting a joined-up approach).

Stakeholders would attend on a voluntary basis, contributing their time to attend and also potentially be part of working groups. We also envisage regular communications to the stakeholder group via an electronic newsletter or LinkedIn group communications.

## Immediate Actions (May-Dec 2023)

- **Launch** the Vision and Routemap, and **engage leaders, delivery partners and investors** who want to collaborate to achieve ambitious and long-lasting change, for example by holding roundtable events. Many of these stakeholders have already been identified through this project.
- Agree the **organisation/partnership structure** to lead implementation of the vision and maintain momentum.
- Establish the **quarterly green space forum** and newsletter for wider professional stakeholders. This will include stakeholders involved in the co-design of this Vision and Routemap, as well as others.
- Finalise the indicators/measures of success for this Vision (drafted on page 56).

*Please note applying for funding is covered in Enabler 2: Funding and Investment.*

## Short-Term Actions (2024-2025)

- **Coordinate implementation** of the Vision and Routemap.
- Seek partners to instigate **pilot projects** (see ideas for pilot projects on page 64).
- Continue to **identify influential leaders at the highest levels** (from the public, private and third sector) to advocate for the urban green space agenda.
- **Raise awareness** about the ORNI Green Space Map for Northern Ireland when finalised.
- Set up **website** (or webpage on an existing website) to host this Vision and Routemap, promote what is already going on, and provide updates on progress.
- Establish **communications/ PR/ marketing campaign** to raise awareness about NI's fantastic green spaces, and the value of them, amongst professional and public audiences.
- **Represent NI's voice** in UK urban green space forums.
- **Facilitate cross-council coordination** on Local Development Plans, Community Plans and associated policies and standards regarding urban green space (*links to Enabler 5 'policy and planning'*).

## Long-Term Actions (2026-2030)

- Support/influence the creation of (or establish) a **Green Infrastructure Framework/tool** similar to Natural England's.
- **Monitor and report** on progress against this Vision and Routemap, and update it as required.
- **Communicate the outcomes** of pilot projects and research projects, that demonstrate the value of urban green space and new models for delivery.
- **National and international leadership** and communication of NI's approach to urban green space.
- **Host** an international urban green space conference in NI.
- Learning from the pilots, scale up and embed the most successful approaches into how we invest and manage urban green spaces.

## Key Stakeholders:

– NI UGS programme leaders (leading role in this enabler)
– All other stakeholder groups will have a role to help take the Vision forward in a coordinated way, and provide leadership and advocacy for the urban green space agenda.

# 4.3 Funding and Investment

"Using a variety of innovative and different models for funding green space can result in better use of public money, and greater community involvement" Lord Bruce-Lockhart, Chair, UK Local Government Association.

Funding and investment are needed to:

– Fund the lead organisation(s) for the next 2-3 years, as a minimum
– Fund pilot projects
– Fund research and mapping projects and the development of tools to support better green infrastructure planning
– Drive larger investment in urban green space projects and supporting infrastructure (e.g. public transport, active travel routes)

We need bold and brave new approaches that enable urban green spaces to attract and receive more funding from diverse sources that have longevity, and this Vision aims to be a catalyst for this.

A key role for the lead organisation(s) will be to make a powerful economic case for significant investment in NI's urban green spaces.

Throughout the co-design process, the need to shift from short-term funding and thinking, to longer-term planning and funding, including considering ongoing maintenance budgets, has been raised several times. Neglected, poorly maintained green spaces can undermine the revival of neighbourhoods and this is something we want to avoid moving forwards in NI – considering both capital and ongoing revenue funding.

Traditionally, urban green spaces are primarily funded and managed by local authorities, however, budgets are very constrained. In recent years, many parks and open spaces in the UK have also received significant lottery funding.

We recognise the need for a blend of existing and new sources of funding, and investment propositions and business models that are sustainable and attractive to new donors, funders and investors. Indeed, demonstrating longevity of projects and even potential return on investment will attract donors, funders and investors, thereby ensuring project sustainability.

Investing smaller amounts in research and pilot projects to test and prove new approaches can also be an effective way to secure larger scale funding and support for more significant urban green space investment projects.

Funding could also be channelled into developing new digital tools to support better urban green space investment, or support access to it. For example, in February 2023 Natural England launched its Green Infrastructure Framework , a major new online tool to help English towns and cities turn greener. The Green Infrastructure Framework provides a structure to analyse where greenspace in urban environments is needed most, and an online green infrastructure mapping tool. It aims to support equitable access to greenspace across the country, with an overarching target for everyone being able to reach good quality greenspace in their local area.

There are many sources of funding for urban green space in Northern Ireland. Some possible funding routes are outlined below, and described further in Appendix I. Possible funding sources include:
– National Lottery Heritage Fund/ National Lottery Community Fund
– Levelling Up Fund
– The Community Ownership Fund
– NI Executive
– Local authorities
– Developer contributions
– Private sector
– NI Tourism Board
– Sport Northern Ireland
– Health Trusts (physical and mental health)
– Community Ownership Fund
– Northern Ireland's Comic Relief Local Communities Programme
– The Community Foundation Northern Ireland
– Idverde Community Investment Fund
– Voluntary and community sector involvement
– Income-generating opportunities
– Endowments
– Crowd funding
– Carbon offsets or biodiversity offsets

There are also interesting green finance options that can be explored. Habitat banking, one form of green finance, provides new finance for nature restoration and long-term funding for maintenance, giving investors a way to support the improvement of urban green spaces.

A key role for the lead organisation(s) will be applying for funding and directing investment into urban green space improvements, as well as monitoring the impact and outcomes from the funding/investment.

1 Community Foundation Northern Ireland, 2023

## Immediate Actions (May-Dec 2023)

• Work with partners to fund/invest in **pilot projects** and **research/mapping studies**.
• **Apply for funding** – to support implementation of the enablers, and for physical pilot projects. Potential funding sources are outlined in Appendix I.

## Short-Term Actions (2024-2025)

• Make a powerful **economic case** for significant investment in NI's urban green spaces in relation to health, climate, biodiversity etc, and communicate this at the highest levels in the public and private sector (links to enabler 1).
• **Establish new blended funding and investment models**, and support pilot projects to apply them.
• **Influence developers and private sector businesses** to increase investment and funding for urban green space projects (through direct investment or CSR funding).
• Work with partners to **develop 'oven ready' projects** that are ready to implement as soon as funding is in place.
• Work with Government to ensure they are leading by example in **Government-led urban regeneration projects**.

## Long-Term Actions (2026-2030)

• Continue to apply for **funding for larger scale investment projects** that build on the pilot projects.
• Investigate **new funding sources**.
• Establish routes for communities to **buy land**, or provide support in managing land on a long term lease.
• Introduce **mechanisms for community groups** to have greater say over where investment is spent (e.g. participatory budgeting).
• **Demonstrate outcomes** from funding and investment in urban green space as a result of this Vision.

## Key Stakeholders:

– NI UGS programme leaders (leading role in this enabler)
– NI Executive (Exec-led investment projects)
– Local Authorities (LA-led investment projects)
– Third sector organisations: NGOS, charities, think tanks, industry institutes (providing funding and supporting pilot projects)
– Private sector: developers, land owners, local businesses (providing direct investment, Developer Contributions and CSR funding)

## Case study: Acorn Farm

A good example of a project with a diverse income is Acorn Farm in Derry/Londonderry.[1] Part of a wider programme to support families to grow their own fruit and vegetables, the urban farm has received £6.2m funding from the Community Foundation NI, HM Government (DLUHC), Derry City & Strabane District Council, and the National Lottery Community Fund.

# 4.4 Involvement of Local People

**"Active involvement of local residents in building urban green spaces increases their identification with and use of the space." World Health Organisation**

Involvement of local people and community groups in all aspects of design, use and management of their local urban green spaces is a key enabler for achievement of this Vision. It also has the potential to increase feelings of 'pride of place', and improve perceptions of the local area as a place to live, as well as build social trust, cohesion and sense of belonging.

The Future Parks Accelerator recognises the need to shift from a position where leadership for urban green spaces are primarily the responsibility of local authorities ("state responsibility") and the community is disconnected/passive in terms of responsibility, towards a model where local people and communities are active and empowered to take responsibility for their urban green spaces ("civic responsibility" and "social entrepreneurialism").

We would like to develop and implement new models for designing and managing urban green spaces, with greater levels of involvement from local people. This is likely to result in positive economic, social and environmental outcomes for the local area, including instilling a stronger connection between the local people and the space. Different approaches and models could be tested as part of a series of pilot projects.

Involvement of local people could be at a range of scales and may include:

– Individuals or community groups taking part in consultations and co-design workshops for the design of new urban green spaces or regeneration schemes, as part of the planning process. Early and meaningful engagement is essential to create spaces that match the needs of local residents.
– The use of community empowerment tools such as Participatory Budgeting (PB) which enable citizens to have a direct say on a percentage of public resources. For example, local people deliberating and prioritising how a Community Infrastructure or

1 The term tactical urbanism refers to a rapid and low-cost and scalable approach to making temporary changes to the urban environment, often in urban gathering areas. It encourages residents to creatively test out alternative ways of using public space to improve neighbourhoods.

Climate Change Fund is allocated in their area.
– Local people volunteering their time to be part of a 'friends of' or similar group for local parks, taking responsibility for some or all of the management of a park.
– New social or community organisations, or locally controlled trusts or societies being established to take on the management of one or a number of parks or green spaces.
– Existing community organisations who already operate for the benefit of the local community, moving into the management of their local green spaces.
– Larger not for profit organisations (such as a Ulster Wildlife or The Woodland Trust) working with the local community to take on green space management.
– Tactical urbanism[1] whereby local people improve underused spaces e.g. rewilding, planting flowers and edible herbs/fruit, community growing raised beds, transforming and reclaiming alleyways.
– Use of meanwhile spaces for communities to connect.

Well managed and animated urban green spaces offer opportunities to build and strengthen community cohesion and to celebrate the diverse range of cultures which exist across our communities. Creating spaces that are safe, welcoming and inclusive can bolster a sense of shared ownership and can deliver positive outcomes.

While the engagement of local people has a large number of potential benefits, it is also important that we acknowledge the challenges associated with this. Community involvement in the management of public land is not a cost saving exercise, in order to work well over time, it needs sustained support from Local Council community development officers, parks and open spaces officers, estate and land officers and public resources – it is only possible and successful if all the support and resourcing measures are in place. As such, guidance and support from expert organisations may be required to make this a success (e.g. horticultural advice, Woodland Trust, ORNI), Groundwork) as well as training and upskilling, and provision of resources (e.g. materials, tools).

Other challenges may include there may not be an obvious local group with the capacity or desire to get involved with the governance of a space. Friends groups are often dedicated but stretched, and are by definition an interest group; they may not involve people from all parts of the community. The perception of access for all could be lost if one particular community dominates in managing a site.

## Immediate Actions (May-Dec 2023)

- Highlight **case studies** of success where local people have played a significant role in the design, delivery and management of urban green spaces (*links to enabler 1*).

## Short-Term Actions (2024-2025)

- Conduct **small-scale pilot projects** with local community groups to act as test-models for funding applications.
- Develop **new models for designing and managing** urban green spaces, with greater levels of involvement from local people.
- Ensure that local people have **greater involvement** in the co-design of local urban green spaces (*links to Enabler 5: policy and planning*).
- Identify and engage expert organisations who can provide **guidance and support** to community-led projects (*links to Enabler 5: knowledge, skills and capacity*).
- Encourage and support local stakeholders to activate the green spaces through programming **events/ things to do** for local people.
- Create **guidance or a toolkit** for people who want to improve their local green spaces to make it easier for communities to know where to start.

## Long-Term Actions (2026-2030)

- **Implement and evaluate new models** for designing and managing urban green spaces with greater levels of involvement from local people.
- Showcase **case studies** nationally and internationally.

## Case study: Ballynahinch Rugby Family Trail

ORNI worked closely with Ballynahinch rugby club, Council and Sport NI to undertake extensive community consultation to deliver a safe, off-road, sustainable Community Trail. The urban area had very little access to green space. It was estimated that for every £1 spent to create the Trail it will generate £16 in return.



## Key Stakeholders:

– Third sector organisations – NGOS, charities (supporting involvement of local people)
– Residents and community groups (active involvement)
– Private sector – developers, land owners, urban designers (engage local people in co-design and operation)
– Local Authorities (encouraging and supporting involvement of local people)
– NI Executive (encouraging and supporting involvement of local people)

# 4.5 Knowledge, Skills and Capacity

"Quality parks need a highly motivated and skilled workforce, now and in the future. They not only need skilled horticulturalists and other green space specialists, but also skilled managers and leaders." CABE Skills to Grow report

To achieve the Vision, we need to improve urban green space knowledge and skills, and capacity to deliver. The successful planning, design, construction, use and maintenance of urban green spaces will draw upon the skills of people working in a broad range of specialist occupations, from landscape architects and policy makers to horticulturalists and event planners. The green space sector also requires management expertise, including skills such as advocacy and community engagement, in order to instil the public with the motivation and confidence to use and enjoy parks and green spaces and influence local authority decision-making.

There is a tremendous opportunity to provide new training and employment opportunities for people in the urban green space sector, commission new research and analysis that will help us value urban green spaces, embed the topic into secondary and undergraduate education, and improve professional knowledge of integrated design to achieve multiple outcomes. During the consultation, a skills gap related to loss of expertise as horticultural staff retire was highlighted – which presents opportunities for increasing horticultural apprenticeships and other training opportunities.

There are a wide range of occupations related to green space, working in a variety of settings and fulfilling a mixture of functions, as illustrated in the figure opposite. All of these occupations will need an element of training and skills development to achieve our Vision for the future of urban green space in NI.

As we tackle the climate, nature and health emergencies over time, new skills needs may emerge. For example, there is a need to do park maintenance differently - moving away from annual bedding planting and short mowed lawns to perennials and shrubs, and creation of meadows, rain gardens etc.

The lead organisation(s) will play a key role in organising (and directing people to) opportunities to improve urban green space knowledge and skills, such as:

– Webinars and events
– Site-based workshops
– Training courses
– Engaging with existing forums and learning/sharing opportunties
– Speaking at schools, colleges and universities on the topic
– Publishing or sharing guidance notes
– Publishing or sharing best practice case studies

The lead organisation(s) will also play a key role in identifying and supporting new research to be undertaken, into topics such as:

– Quantifying the value of urban green space investment, particularly in relation to climate mitigation measures such as installing solar panels, ground source heat pumps, flooding prevention, CO2 removal etc.
– Analysis tools to assist local authorities and developers understand where urban green space investment is required the most.
– Inequality of access to nature/green space particularly for deprived communities as well as health and wellbeing outcomes
– Common & agreed measures of urban green space quality
– How to design urban green spaces that benefit both public and nature

There remains a gap in public and professional understanding of the countless benefits urban green spaces offer to society. As such, this enabler (which focuses on knowledge and skills) relates very strongly to Enabler 1, which deals with communication and advocacy.

1   CABE, 2009. Skills to Grow: Seven Priorities to improve green space skills

### Immediate Actions (May-Dec 2023)

- **Identify topics for research projects** (in collaboration with universities or industry organisations) and support funding applications for larger research projects (*links to Enabler 2 funding and investment*).
- **Identify and establish links** with key academic and non-academic institutions.

### Short-Term Actions (2024-2025)

- Arrange or signpost **webinars, training, guidance, case studies** for professional stakeholders.
- Run a series of **training workshops for the general public** on conservation and maintenance of urban green spaces to enhance biodiversity, growing food etc.
- Identify **skills gaps** and promote apprenticeships and other training and job creation opportunities.
- Conduct or instigate **mapping studies** e.g. biodiversity, flood risk, clean air, safety, bus routes, cycle routes.

### Long-Term Actions (2026-2030)

- Influence **new university courses or modules, as well as vocational courses** related to integrated urban green space planning and management.
- Establish **major research programmes** on the urban green space agenda.

### Key Stakeholders:

– Third sector organisations – NGOS, charities, think tanks, industry institutes (through publishing research/guidance/case studies, hosting webinars and events, providing training, providing expert advice).
– Universities, colleges and schools (through weaving urban green space knowledge and skills into the curriculum, conducting research projects, offering apprenticeships).
– Local people and community groups (taking part in upskilling and capacity building opportunities, and also passing on their expertise to others).
– Local Authorities (increasing skills and capacity to deliver on this Vision).
– Private sector – developers, land owners, landscape Institute, urban designers (increasing skills and capacity to deliver on this Vision).
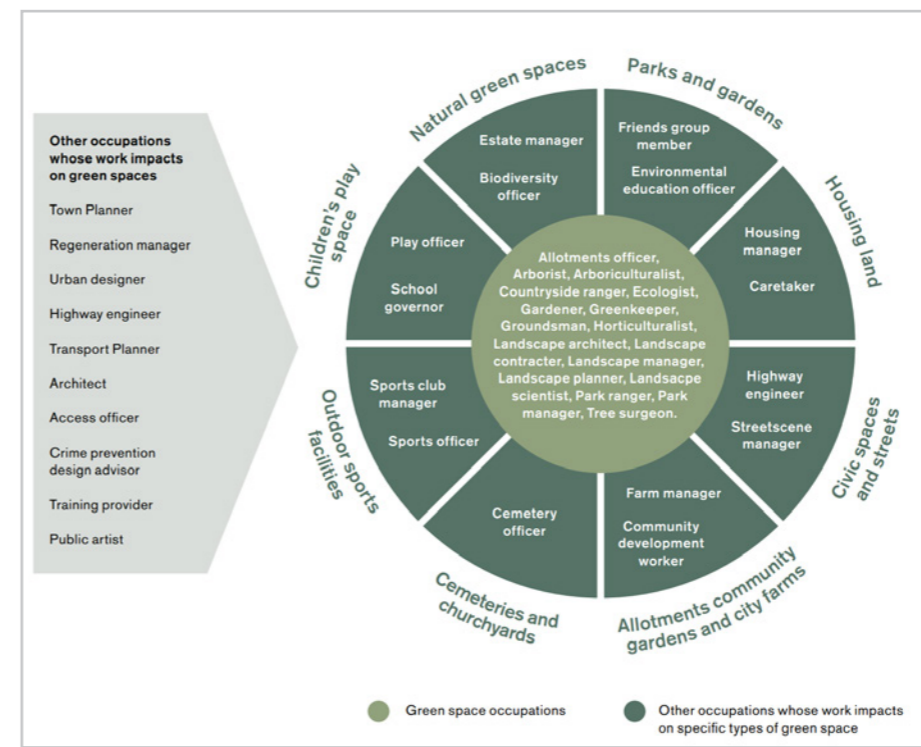


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# 4.6  Policy and Planning

"Within local authorities, urban green spaces should be considered across regional and local planning processes to achieve a higher impact." World Health Organisation

As this is a Vision for the whole of Northern Ireland, the involvement of government at all levels is essential to support a joined-up approach. The current absence of an executive means that collaboration across the 11 local authorities is even more important.

Central and local government can play a key role in the future of urban green space by championing the agenda, policy development and implementation, and updating outdated legislation (e.g. stakeholders have called for the current 1983 access order to be revised to empower councils to be able to develop green spaces).

However, many policies are in draft form or are out of date. The current lack of investment into green spaces suggests that clear policy on this agenda, and effective implementation of these policies, is crucial.

The co-design processes undertaken for this project also identified several key areas of policy requiring change - these are highlighted on the adjacent page.

The introduction of a NI Green Infrastructure Framework, similar to the Natural England Green Infrastructure Framework, would support better green infrastructure planning by providing a structure to analyse where greenspace in urban environments is needed most.

The planning process is a key lever for improving urban green spaces, and access to them.  All councils are in the process of developing their Local Development Plans (LDP) which will be the primary consideration for decision making on all new development schemes, delivering a plan-led system.

We understand the LDPs are all seeking to strengthen sustainable development ambitions, and to deliver wider outcomes from urban and rural development.

Local authorities can use their planning powers to influence developers to achieve more, through:

– Local Development Plan requirements and supporting policies
– Encouraging community co-design and consultation
– Pre-Application Discussions and support
– Pre-application Community Consultation for Regional and Major planning applications
– Guiding Developer Contributions investment (currently only relevant for Belfast City Council who have a Developer Contributions Framework in place)

Government can also help deliver this Vision through the Strategic Masterplanning process for regeneration and strategic urban redevelopment projects. The Strategic Masterplanning process involves working collaboratively with other statutory authorities, local interest groups, the main site promoters and other landowners and urban design professionals, to develop a vision and strategy for the overall development of a site.

The protection of existing green spaces from development is also a high priority.  Government can demonstrate leadership for this through protection of existing urban green spaces on their public estate, and enhancement of biodiversity.

## Case Study: Fields in Trust

Fields in Trust is an independent charity with over 90 years' experience protecting parks and green spaces. They work with landowners, community groups and policy makers to champion the value of our parks and green spaces to achieve better protection for their future at both local and national level.   Fields in Trust works with nearly 300 local authorities, over 650 town, parish and community councils and over 150 private landowners who have at least one park or green space protected in perpetuity.

In NI, Fields in Trust have been involved in protecting a number of parks, however there is scope for a much larger number of urban green spaces to be protected in perpetuity.

## Suggested Future Policy Change

Throughout the co-design workshop processes, there have been several key areas of policy that have been identified as requiring change if we are to maximise the potential of urban green spaces to meet the needs of society in the future, and play a role in climate, nature and health solutions.

Below are some of the main areas participants flagged for action:

### Integration
Integration of planning, urban regeneration, biodiversity, and climate strategies at a local authority level, to ensure investment decisions are embedding high quality greenspace into the future urban fabric.

### Planning Policy Statement 8

Currently Planning Policy Statement 8 on Open space, Sport and Outdoor Recreation sets out that in new residential developments a normal expectation for open space provision would be 10% and has a good definition of open space. Once Local Development Plans are completed this statement will no longer be a material consideration. Councils are still in the process of completing their Local Development Plans, these should be in line with PPS8 to ensure enough high-quality open space is provided.

From an Urban Green Space and climate action perspective, the new Climate Act requires that planning, like any other government function, will have to show how it contributes to targets in carbon budgets etc. In this context, a more proactive approach to urban green spaces will be needed, with them positioned as an integral part of new development - not just providing the bare minimum to meet the policy requirement.
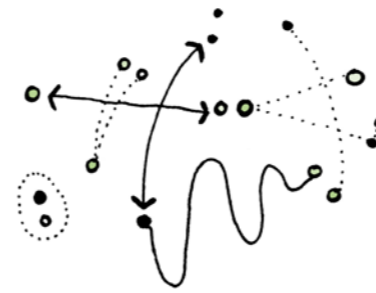
### NI Biodiversity Strategy

The existing Biodiversity Strategy is out of date (2020) and is currently going through a co-design process. This will consist of workshops in 2023 to develop targets for nature's recovery..

From an urban green space perspective, it would be beneficial to include the below SMART targets in the Biodiversity Strategy:

– Develop a nature recovery network and local nature recovery plans for Local Authorities.
– Northern Ireland Local Authorities develop and deliver plans to sustainably increase the area, quality of, access to and benefits from green and blue spaces in urban areas.
– 90% of households have publicly accessible quality natural space within 400m of their home and at least one site with substantial green space within 2km by 2050.
– Improved accessibility to nature.
– Development of a Land-Use Strategy that balances sustainable land use, biodiversity and climate needs
– A Green Infrastructure map of publicly accessible land and trails.

### Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022

This Act includes targets for greenhouse gas emissions, active travel, biodiversity, carbon budgets, air quality and a requirement to support of nature-based solutions; all of which our Urban Green Spaces have the potential to play a role in meeting these targets.

Urban green spaces should be considered within the new Climate Action Plans – nature based projects is part of the NI Climate Act, and green space investment can to help deliver climate resilience in terms of reduction in heat stress, flood alleviation and nature networks.

When it comes to climate adaptation, we require better monitoring of conditions such as heat stress events and flooding in urban environments, to inform future plans.

**The 1932 Allotments Act**

Social Farms and Gardens recently published a report (March 2023) "The Case for a Benchmark Standard for Community Growing and Allotment Provision in Northern Ireland". It outlines that the 1932 Allotments Act allows Councils to acquire and improve land for allotments, or use land already in the council's possession which is not currently needed.

The Act does not make any mention of community gardens or orchards, and any future legislative reform would benefit from including other forms of community growing. The report recommends that that Councils adopt a target level of provision of 1250 sqm (0.3 acres) per 1,000 households of community growing space in their Council area. This could be in the form of allotments, community gardens or orchards.

**Programme for Government Draft Outcomes Framework**

The NI Executive has developed the Programme for Government Draft Outcomes Framework which is a new approach focusing on the major societal outcomes that the Executive wants to achieve.

The image below shows the relationship between urban green space and the outcomes framework, clearly demonstrating that it helps achieve all of the NI Executive's priority outcomes.

UGS can provide healthy environments for children to play, exercise, socialise, and spend time in nature

UGS help make our communities and cities more pleasant places to live and work, and help attract tourists

UGS can support sustainable lifestyles and provide vital climate resilience, biodiversity and air quality benefits

Investment in UGS by the Government, private sector and third sector is essential for bringing social, environmental and economic benefits to the people of NI throughout their lives

UGS should be accessible to everyone and can help build thriving cohesive communities

UGS should be safe spaces that provide multiple social benefits and support everyone to thrive

UGS can support healthy and active lifestyles through provision of space for exercise and relaxation in nature, accessible by walking and cycling routes

UGS can not only support economic growth but 'green growth' and 'inclusive growth'; key priorities for NI

UGS can provide opportunities for outdoor learning, research, skills development and job opportunities, as well as provide tranquil spaces for people to reflect on their lives, enabling everyone to reach their potential

**Programme for Government Draft Outcomes Framework**

- People want to live, work and visit here
- Our children and young people have the best start in life
- We live and work sustainably – protecting the environment
- We have an equal and inclusive society where everyone is valued and treated with respect
- We all enjoy long, healthy, active lives
- Everyone can reach their potential
- Our economy is globally competitive, regionally balanced and carbon-neutral
- Everyone feels safe – we all respect the law and each other
- We have a caring society that supports people throughout their lives

1  The relationship between urban green space (UGS) and the PfG Outcomes Framework

**Immediate Actions (May-Dec 2023)**

- **Communication and advocacy** of this vision to NI Executive and Local Authorities (*see Enabler 1*).
- Encourage **Local Authorities to attend quarterly urban green space forum**, or establish stand-alone forum.

**Short-Term Actions (2024-2025)**

- Influence NI Executive to **review and update policy and legislation** that links to the urban green space agenda (highlighted in this section of the Routemap).
- NI Executive to provide **leadership for joined-up approaches** to urban green space delivery in line with this Vision, and advocate for the role of urban green space in helping to achieve the Programme for Government outcomes (building on work done in this Vision)
- Local Authorities to embed the principles in this Vision into **Local Development Plans**, supporting policies and Strategic Masterplanning.
- Belfast City Council currently direct **developer contributions** to public realm and open space improvements; these should continue and be better publicized, showing the benefits for urban green spaces.
- Encourage other councils to adopt **Developer Contributions** planning legislation and direct it to urban green space improvements.
- Signpost (or establish) common & agreed **measures of green space quality.**
- Lead the creation of a **Green Space Standard or Charter** that stakeholders can sign up to, or adopt.

**Long-Term Actions (2026-2030)**

- Strengthen policy related to urban green space, and planning requirements, over time.
- Improve integrated infrastructure investment led by NI Exec and local authorities.
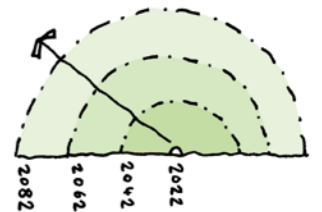
**Key Stakeholders:**

– NI Executive (through role in policy, legislation, Strategic Masterplanning).
– Local Authorities (through role in Local Development Plans and supporting policies, utilising planning powers, Strategic Masterplanning).
– Third sector organisations – NGOS, charities (through lobbying for policy and legislation updates, supporting involvement of local people and community groups in the planning process).

# 4.7  Pilot Project Ideas

As explained on page 50, pilot projects are ideas and suggestions for physical urban green space investment and improvement projects that test the Vision.

We invite stakeholders to:
– Join us in taking the initiative and incorporating the Vision principles into the design, delivery and long-term use and maintenance of both existing and new urban green spaces through pilot projects.
– Test out new and innovative approaches, and communicate successes and lessons learnt.
– Seek new collaborations and partnerships and help the lead organisation/partnership apply for funding for some of the larger areas of urban green space investment.

As illustrated in our Routemap diagram on page 50, conducting small-scale pilot projects in 2023 or 2024 could develop a strong basis for larger scale investment projects, or the evolution of new management models between a community group and council, that could be implemented in the future.

In the table below, we outline potential pilot projects, aligned to the Vision principles.  They are purposely quite generic to act as prompts rather than definitive project proposals. Many are derived from the 'Could we' propositions in the Vision.

| Vision Principle | Suggested Pilot Projects<br><br>Projects that… |
|---|---|
| **Community and Wellbeing** | – Increase participation in community life, arts, culture, sport and physical activity<br>– Increase community-managed/designed urban green spaces<br>– Ensure every resident in Northern Ireland has equal opportunity to an allotment within 15-minutes walk from their home<br>– Support physical, emotional and mental health and wellbeing, and enable more sport and physical activity to take place<br>– Provide better multi-age play spaces<br>– Provide sheltered spaces and benches<br>– Introduce a wide range of events/activities to activate the spaces<br>– Implement integrated neighbourhood planning and test out new approaches for this<br>– Celebrate our cultural heritage and pride of place<br>– Invite tactical urbanism<br>– Improve local economic outcomes – including creating green jobs, volunteering opportunities and improving employability and skills levels in the local community |
| **Access and Inclusivity** | – Improve active travel and accessibility e.g. cycle and walking routes, cycle parking, cycle hire, bus routes, step-free access, and local signage.<br>– Focus on safety, in particular during night-time, improving lighting and activity<br>– Support tactical micro-greening projects to make links between community parks<br>– Introduce green routes between schools and local green spaces |
| **Climate and Biodiversity** | – Improve green-blue infrastructure and connectivity between existing urban green spaces.<br>– Increase urban biodiversity and support nature recovery as part of a regenerative approach<br>– Develop ZSL's 'Rewilding our Cities' programme<br>– Improve climate resilience, such as sustainable urban drainage systems.<br>– Further develop and better integrate the Living with Water programme<br>– Support local people to take on the management of green spaces. |
| **A Joined-up Approach** | In addition, we would like to encourage pilot projects that embody the Vision and all of the Vision principles, taking a joined-up approach to urban green space design, delivery, use and maintenance.  This includes adopting the '15-minute city' neighbourhood concept - where everything a person needs is reachable within a fifteen minute walking or cycling distance.  It could also include projects that adopt 'Doughnut Economics' principles, addressing social and environmental needs in tandem. In addition, projects that increase feelings of pride in, and improve perceptions of, the local area as a place to live. |

**Evaluation of Pilot Projects**

In this section, we have provided some criteria that could be used to evaluate the outcomes from pilot projects.  These will be developed and refined.

Community & Wellbeing:

– What communities have you worked with during this project?
– How have communities been involved in planning and caring for their local green space?
– Have there been any benefits to participants wellbeing?
– Has there been any training provided to local people?

Access & Inclusivity:

– Has assess to your site increased as a result of this project?
– How have you ensured that a wide range of people have been included? Has this resulted in previously under-represented groups being involved?

Climate & Biodiversity:

– Have you created any new habitats or incorporated any measures such as flood alleviation?
– What do you anticipate the project's contribution to climate and biodiversity outcomes will be in the long term?

A Joined-Up Approach:

– How have the needs of people and nature been balanced?
– What other sectors/organisations have you worked with during this project?
– What have been the main pros and cons of working with these other organisations?

General:

– How has receiving this extra money affected the work that you are doing in your urban green space? Have you done anything differently as a result?
– Are there other benefits that haven't been covered above that have come about because of the project?

# 4.8 Measures of Success

We have identified a series of draft indicators/measures of success for this Vision, using a combination of short, medium and long term indicators.

We recognise there is work to do to understand the baseline position to be able to measure 'increases' and outcomes, and this has been built into the action plan. As such, these indicators will be refined and become more sophisticated over time.

## A Joined-up Approach

| Short Term | Medium Term | Long Term |
|---|---|---|
| – Established UGS forum to support cross-sector collaboration | – Number of people that sign up to the quarterly urban green space forum<br>– Established dataset on the value of urban green space shared online<br>– Community groups involved in new UGS project plans | – Green space recognised by those with budgetary powers as good value for money<br>– Policy changes enable greater green space support and resourcing<br>– Cross sector & boarder collaboration on a number of major UGS projects ensuring the balance of people and wildlife needs<br>– NI viewed as an example of best practice for its approach to UGS |

## Community and Wellbeing

| Short Term | Medium Term | Long Term |
|---|---|---|
| – Local needs better understood thorugh mapping and local insights | – Increase in wellbeing initiatives and events to activate UGS, working with Healthy Living Centres<br>– More local communities using their local UGS and positively engaging with park staff<br>– Increase in integrated neighbourhood planning<br>– UGS design reflects needs of local community<br>– UGS viewed as a community asset meeting local needs<br>– Nature led education for all age groups in UGS | – Increase in community empowerment and sense of ownership may result in community managed UGS<br>– Nature led education integrated into curriculum<br>– Every resident access to allotments within 15min of home<br>– Increased health and wellbeing of local people using UGS |

## Access and Inclusivity

| Short Term | Medium Term | Long Term |
|---|---|---|
| – People know where their local greenspaces are and how to get to them | – Green spaces are welcoming, well managed, safe spaces that people want to use<br>– Improvements in accessibility of NI's urban green spaces via public transport and active travel linkages | – More people use UGS more frequently<br>– Increase in active travel to urban green spaces |

## Climate and Biodiversity

| Short Term | Medium Term | Long Term |
|---|---|---|
| – Training on conservation and management identified<br>– Simple changes such as grass cutting regimes and species selection undertaken where appropriate | – Communities informed about the benefits of UGS in relation to climate and biodiversity, helping them get involved and make changes in their own homes<br>– Improved green connectivity/ green-blue infrastructure investment linking with nature recovery networks<br>– Ensure public access needs are balanced with current wildlife use of a site and local biodiversity targets (baseline biodiversity maps required)<br>– Map risks such as flooding and integrate plans other departments such as 'Living with Water' team<br>– Increase in tree planting and canopy cover, particularly in previous grey and brown sites | – Increase in urban biodiversity<br>– Reduction in flooding issues<br>– Improved air quality<br>– Reduction in urban heat island effect |

# 5    Appendices