

The case for open space

1. Benefits and opportunities



Benefits and opportunities

Research by the Government has measured the following social, economic and environmental benefits of open space.

- Regeneration and economy
- Health and wellbeing
- Heritage – natural, built and cultural
- Education
- Community development



Regeneration and economy

Open space can have a significant effect on towns and other centres. For example, good-quality civic spaces, parks, gardens and other types of open space can be a great marketing tool to attract people and economic investment. Good-quality open spaces also improve residential areas and build business and community confidence.

Open spaces show people how attractive an area is in which to live or set up business. The more attractive the open space, the bigger the incentive will be to live, work or spend time there.

Health and wellbeing

The health of our nation is currently a cause for concern, especially the health of our children and young people. Recent national studies have identified that 20% of four-year-olds are now overweight, and 8.5% of six-year-olds and 15% of 15-year-olds are now obese.

This rise in obesity is linked to a reduction in activity. A lack of exercise when young can lead to health problems in later life, such as heart disease and diabetes.

- 63% of men and 75% of women do not take part in physical activity at the recommended level for health benefits.
- 22% of men and 26% of women can be classed as completely inactive.
- 40% of boys and 60% of girls aged two to 15 do not meet the recommended physical activity of one hour a day.
- Nearly 66% of all men and 50% of women are overweight or obese.

In comparison to people in Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland, people who live in Northern Ireland (2001 Northern Ireland Health and Social Well Being Survey – NIHSWB) are less likely to say that their health is good (only 53.9% of all 18- to 74-year-olds). In Northern Ireland, we also have higher levels of cardiovascular disease (26%).

This survey also found that the percentage of people who responded with deteriorating mental health, over the last 12 months, was around one-third higher than in England and Scotland (21.1%).





There was a strong link between taking exercise and good health. Compared to people who were active, five times as many people who were not active reported that their general health was not as good.

High-quality open space in Belfast plays a role in improving our physical and mental wellbeing. We hope to have a positive effect on these figures by providing opportunities for everyone to take part in all sorts of recreation.

Enjoying open spaces, whether through walking, sport, cycling or play, can:

- reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease;
- reduce the risk of coronary heart disease;
- reduce the risk of stroke;
- delay the start of high blood pressure, and reduce blood pressure;
- lower the risk of developing type-2 diabetes;
- help prevent and treat non-specific back pain through moving joints;
- reduce the risk of depression and have positive benefits for mental health;
- reduce anxiety; and
- improve mood and self-esteem.

Heritage – natural, built and cultural

For the purposes of this strategy, we have defined the term heritage as including natural, built and cultural heritage. For more detailed information on an audit of open-space heritage assets based on historical landscape features and built heritage, see appendix 5.

Natural heritage

Our parks and green spaces play an important role in improving our urban environment, helping to reduce pollution levels and benefiting wildlife. In particular, they:

- give us a wide variety of landscapes;
- improve the appearance of the environment;
- include historical landscapes such as former estates;
- provide habitats for many birds, animals, wildflowers and trees;
- can include priority habitats and species as outlined in the Northern Ireland Biodiversity Strategy;
- can act as wildlife corridors (green spaces that encourage particular species to spread);
- reduce surface water and play a major role in drainage;
- can form allotments and community gardens; and
- allow people to get involved in nature.

Policy statement 1: Biodiversity

(Biodiversity can be defined as the whole variety of life on earth)

We will protect, improve and promote biodiversity according to a local biodiversity action plan in line with the recommendations of the Northern Ireland Biodiversity Strategy.

The trees and vegetation in our open spaces act as 'lungs', improving the quality of the air we breathe by removing carbon dioxide and replacing it with oxygen. In particular, they:

- act as filters, reducing the levels of sulphur dioxide, nitrogen oxide and other pollutants in our atmosphere;
- act as green filters in industrial areas, collecting elements such as heavy metals (Borhid 1988);
- filter out up to 85% of suspended particles from the air (Johnson and Newton 1996); and
- reduce air temperatures as moisture is released from the leaves. In large parks, the summer daytime temperatures have been recorded as being two to three degrees less than in surrounding streets.

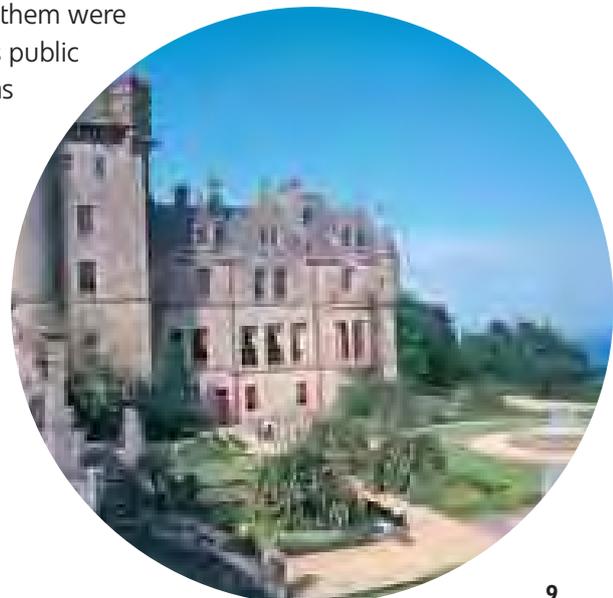
Policy statement 2: Urban forestry

We will aim to develop and extend an attractive landscape of well-managed woodlands that is beneficial to the places where people live and work.

Built heritage

Our parks and open spaces are a vital part of Belfast's history. Many of them were once privately owned estates, others were created in Victorian times as public parks. They contain historical features and Victorian architecture such as gate lodges, park railings, gates and bandstands. In particular, they:

- contain features of special architectural and historic interest;
- include historic gardens and landscapes;
- include listed buildings and archaeological sites and monuments; and
- offer huge potential for education and tourism because of their historical value, for example, the Palm House in Botanic Gardens and the prehistoric Ballyaghagan Fort in Cavehill Country Park.



Policy statement 3: Built heritage

We will work to protect, improve and promote the built heritage in our open spaces by working with independent agencies and local communities.

Cultural heritage

Parks and open spaces are an important part of the social history and culture of our city. Many people used to enjoy events such as egg-rolling down Cave Hill and public entertainment galas at the Botanic Gardens and the Waterworks. Today, other events and festivals are held outdoors in our parks. In particular, parks and open spaces provide:

- places for community events;
- venues for local events, such as civic celebrations, festivals, outdoor musical performances, theatre and guided walks;
- places for children to enjoy fun days, outdoor games and informal play;
- opportunities for local artists and sculptors to show their work; and
- a valuable resource for the community through allotment sites.

Policy statement 4: Events

We will develop a broad events programme in parks across the city with local communities. This programme will be varied and community-based, which will encourage more people to use open space.

Education

Our city's parks and open spaces provide a freely available outdoor educational resource for children and adults. For many years, schoolchildren have been on trips to local parks for geography, local history and environmental studies. Our parks and open spaces provide:

- a local educational resource where people can get closer to the natural world;
- a local educational resource through cemeteries where people can discover the rich cultural heritage of our city;



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- outdoor classrooms for learning about specific topics;
- the potential to educate and train environmental designers and managers;
- focal points for community training schemes;
- readily accessible links to themes within the school curriculum; and
- learning opportunities such as orienteering and nature trails.



Policy statement 5: Education

We will make sure that everyone understands the benefits of open space through environmental education programmes and by developing stronger links with independent agencies.

Community development

Open space can be used for community and voluntary activities. Good-quality open spaces allow all sections of society to come together and take part in a wide range of outdoor activities. Safe and well-maintained parks give groups, such as children or wheelchair users, the chance to take part in a wide range of civic events or community activities. They develop local pride and raise awareness of benefits, locally and throughout the city.

By providing free access to these open spaces, we continue to offer an environmentally friendly alternative to indoor leisure activities.

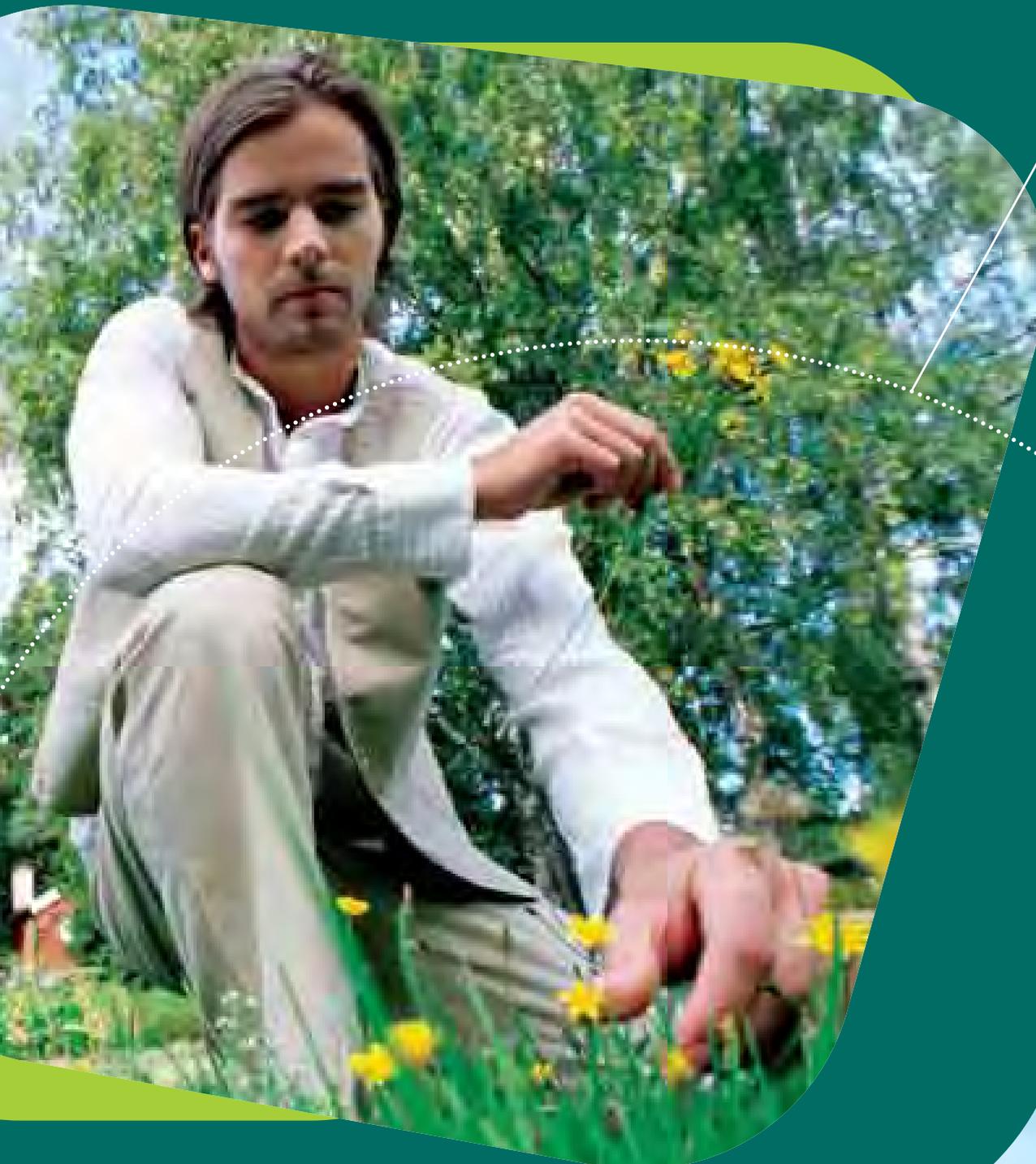


Number of events, school visits and enquiries relating to open space, conservation and education was 306 in 2004, total numbers of people in attendance was 98,500



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2. Strategic context



Strategic context

Improving public space is a priority for all local authorities in Great Britain. This aim to recognise the importance and benefits of open space in towns and cities is high on the government agenda. Research shows that good-quality open space attracts more users, and offers opportunities for active recreation, outdoor education and community pride. It also improves the quality of people's lives and contributes to better neighbourhoods.

This strategy provides a framework for improving individual open spaces. It will help us to communicate our shared vision and goals to stakeholders and to local communities. It will also support other redevelopment strategies for the city.

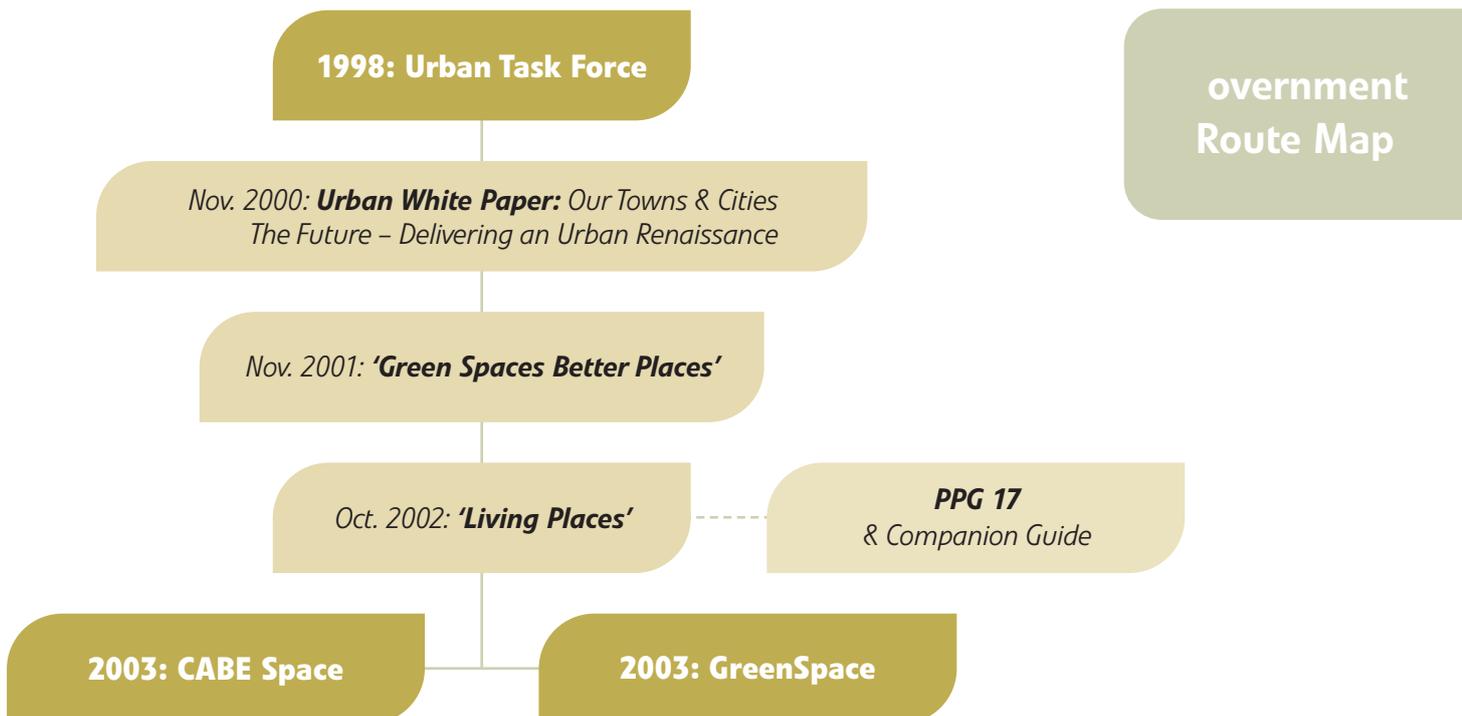
When we were developing this strategy, we looked at national and regional issues that will affect our open spaces.

Central government agenda

In 1998, the Government asked the Urban Task Force to examine the decline in towns across England. Initial research highlighted problems and led to 'CABE Space' (Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment) being set up in 2003.

The aim of CABE Space is to bring excellence to the design and management of public spaces in towns and cities, with a focus on the standard of parks and green spaces.

CABE Space has appointed a strategic partner in Greenspace, launched in 2003. Greenspace aims to become the leading supporter for the economic, social and environmental benefits of better-planned open space.



Central government legislation

Planning policy guidance 17 (PPG 17), 'Planning for open space, sport and recreation', was introduced in England in 2002.

PPG 17 is the latest national guideline for best practice in assessing and providing high-quality open space. The guidance note, which applies only to English planning law, says that open-space planning will only be successful if it meets the needs of the communities it serves. PPG 17 says that to achieve the full potential of a city's open space, we need to carry out an assessment to find out current levels of accessibility and quality.

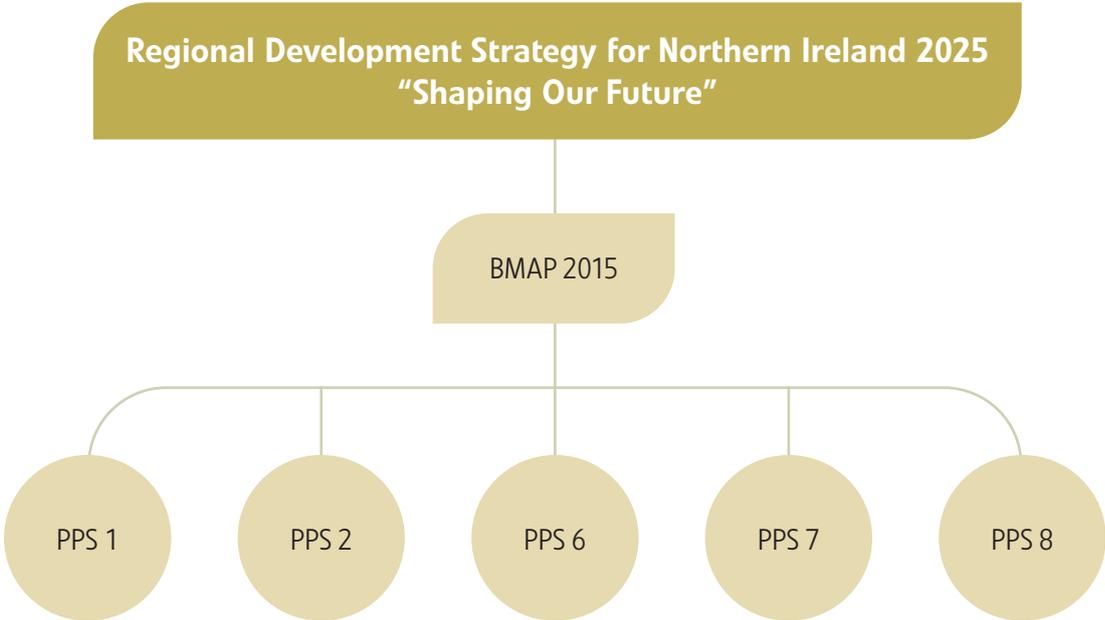
Regional position

The national focus on open space is not reflected in Northern Ireland. The split in delivering public services between local government agencies and local councils may be a factor. However, it is very important that we consider the profile, contribution and priority of open spaces. We have identified a number of key external documents which have influenced our thinking. They include:

- the Regional Development Strategy;
- the Draft Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan (BMAP);
- the Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy, 'People and Place';
- the Investing for Health Strategy;
- the Healthy Cities Strategic Plan;
- the Community Safety Partnership Strategic Plan;
- the Public Realm Strategy;
- the Review of Public Administration;
- the Physical Activity Strategy; and
- the Northern Ireland Biodiversity Strategy.



Regional & Local Planning



In 1996, the Government introduced the 'Quality Initiative' in Northern Ireland with the aim of promoting the importance of good design and quality standards within the built environment. Planning policy statements (PPS) set out the department's policies on certain aspects of planning land use across Northern Ireland.

In relation to protecting and planning open space in Belfast, we have used the following policy statements to form a legal framework for this strategy.

- PPS 1: general principles
- PPS 2: planning and nature conservation
- PPS 6: planning, archaeology and the built heritage
- PPS 7: quality residential environments
- PPS 8: open space, sport and outdoor recreation

PPS 8 is particularly relevant, as it sets out the department's policy on protecting and providing open space in relation to new residential development, and using land for sport and recreation. We support the policies set out in PPS 8. We have used the following planning aims to develop our strategic review of open space.

- Protect existing open space.
- Create more open space in partnership with local communities.
- Make sure any areas where there is a lack of open space are identified.
- Make sure there is easy access to these spaces.
- Maintain and improve existing standards for providing and maintaining open space.

As well as these, we have taken account of the strategies and plans of:

- Belfast Education and Library Board;
- Northern Ireland Housing Executive;
- Roads Service;
- Department of Agriculture;
- Heritage Lottery Fund;
- Arts Council; and
- Environment and Heritage Service.

We will also have to take account of the ongoing review of public administration. This may present opportunities to highlight and resolve some of these issues by transferring roles and powers.



The Spring Show held at Barnetts Demesne attracts over 3,000 visitors every year



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3. Our priorities



Our priorities

We set out our corporate aims and priorities through the Corporate Plan 2003-2006. In developing this strategy we have paid particular attention to making sure our actions are consistent. It is our view that open space has a positive contribution to make to the following priority issues.

Corporate aim 1 - *Providing civic leadership*

- **Providing leadership for the city**

Corporate aim 2 - *Improving the quality of life, now and for future generations*

- **Creating a clean and attractive city**
- **Creating a healthy city**
- **Creating a strong economy**

Corporate aim 3 - *Promoting good relations*

- **Encouraging and supporting good relations**

Corporate aim 4 - *Delivering best services*

- **Improving services for children and young people**
- **Encouraging continuous service improvement.**



In and around Belfast's parks and open spaces you can find over 200 species of bird, 21 different mammals, 20 species of butterfly and 11 types of dragonfly



This strategy will also support the following council initiatives:

- Brighter Belfast
- Good Relations Strategy
- Capital City Agenda
- Belfast Masterplan
- Community Safety Strategy
- Community Support Plan



Brighter Belfast

The Brighter Belfast scheme includes a wide range of actions aimed at improving the cleanliness, attractiveness and environmental profile of the city. Our strategy will work to support Brighter Belfast by:

- improving the quality of our open spaces;
- promoting the increased use of open spaces;
- improving how we work with independent agencies; and
- working to improve the quality of life of local communities and neighbourhoods.

Good Relations Strategy

The Good Relations Strategy will encourage a tolerant and fair society, where people are respected and their differences are celebrated.

We think that everyone should have access to open space. So, it is very important that we remove any physical barriers, and break down social, political, cultural, religious and economic barriers. Our strategy will support good relations in the city by:

- improving access to open spaces for everyone;
- encouraging a wider range of outdoor events across the city;
- developing better relationships with local communities; and
- making sure that open spaces are suitable for everyone.



We provide 0.95 ha of sports pitches for every 1000 people in Belfast. This equates to 1 football pitch for every 736 residents



Belfast: Capital City 2003-2006

Our Capital City Agenda is taking a lead role in redeveloping Belfast through its economy, culture and arts, and tourist potential. We believe that open spaces can help improve the environmental quality of local neighbourhoods. Our strategy will support this agenda by:

- using open space for cultural and art-based events;
- using open space to attract more tourists;
- supporting the Arterial Routes (main roads through the city) programme to bring about environmental improvements and include every group within the community; and
- contributing to the economy by providing the workforce with an appropriate environment that will help to improve their health and wellbeing.



The Belfast Master Plan

The Belfast Master Plan proposes a framework for redeveloping Belfast up to 2020. The plan raises a number of important issues which we must cover in this strategy. It refers to Belfast being divided in delivering public services and also in physical terms, for example, the Westlink motorway and communities to the west. This strategy can help deliver the Master Plan by:

- physically linking open spaces;
- developing more greenways (see table 1) across the city;
- improving access to the countryside, including the Belfast Hills, the Lagan Valley, the Castlereagh Hills and Belfast Lough; and
- taking a lead role in providing high-quality open space in the city.

Community Safety Strategy

Through the Community Safety Strategy, we aim to prevent and reduce the range of factors which affect people's right to live without fear of crime. The strategy aims to deliver local solutions with the help of local communities. Community safety was a major theme that arose from our consultation process. Our strategy can help deliver the Community Safety Strategy by:

- changing people's view that open spaces are unsafe;
- encouraging more local people to use these places for recreation;
- helping to reduce levels of vandalism and antisocial behaviour in open spaces; and
- making open spaces accessible to all communities by providing facilities and events which appeal to everyone.

Community Support Plan 2004-2007

The Community Support Plan will help to improve the quality of life of those who live in Belfast, particularly those who are most disadvantaged. Through partnership working, it highlights the need to build more communities who influence decisions that will improve local neighbourhoods and help deliver better public services. This strategy can help deliver the plan by:

- involving more local communities in regenerating open space;
- organising more community-led events in open space;
- arranging more local management agreements for open space; and
- making local communities aware of the benefits of open space.

In conclusion, we have identified a wide range of benefits associated with good-quality open space. We have also shown how this strategy cuts across the wider council agenda and can help to deliver a number of our corporate priorities.

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We have also shown that better open spaces can contribute to the goals of many independent agencies. In summary, accessible, good-quality open space in Belfast will:

- improve community safety;
- build local confidence in neighbourhoods;
- bring communities closer together;
- improve our general health and wellbeing;
- raise the environmental profile of the city;
- make Belfast a more attractive place;
- make a contribution towards a better economy; and
- improve our environmental resources.





Ormeau Park is Belfast's oldest municipal park and was opened in 1871. Falls Park, Belfast's second public park, was opened in 1873



Over 80 species of grass and wild flowers grow in the meadows at Barnett Demesne and Sir Thomas and Lady Dixon Park

