

# What do we have, and how good is it?

The physical context



### The physical context

We are responsible for:

- parks and open spaces;
- 11,000 trees on streets;
- planning and developing existing and new council-owned open space;
- managing buildings and heritage features in open space;
- providing outdoor play facilities;
- providing cemeteries;
- improving access routes within the city;
- environmental education within parks;
- events within open spaces;
- nature conservation and biodiversity within open spaces;
- marketing open space;
- leading partnerships relating to open space and recreation;
- zoological and botanical collections; and
- horticultural features.

We maintain:

- two city parks;
- nine district parks;
- 36 local parks;
- five country parks;
- eight playing fields;
- 42 playgrounds;
- nine cemeteries; and
- Belfast Zoo.

#### Council Maintained Open Space



### Types of open space

We provide and maintain a varied range of open spaces. It was clear at the start that we needed to classify what types of open space we own and what condition they are currently in. We also needed to know if these spaces met local needs. In line with best practice guidelines, we have developed a classification system for our public open spaces.

The aim of our open-space classification system is to help people understand Belfast's parks and open spaces, and to create a measure for assessing future planning.

As part of the strategic process of mapping and assessing open space, our urban parks are subdivided under the categories of city, district, neighbourhood and country.

**Table 1 – Open space classification**

Category	Action	Policy Statement
Parks	Areas for informal recreation, community events and semi-natural habitats	See table 2.
Playing fields	Areas for outdoor sports, such as pitch sports, tennis, bowls and athletics	6 We will continue to work with our partners to provide a wide range of good-quality, well-used and modern recreational facilities across the city, giving everyone the opportunity to improve their health and wellbeing by becoming more active.
Play areas	Areas for play and social interaction involving children and young people, such as equipped play areas and ball courts	7 We will work with all relevant organisations to meet the play needs of all children and young people.
Allotments	Areas for people who want to grow their own produce and important for health and community involvement	8 We will work to promote the benefits of allotments and encourage people to use them by developing more local partnerships. We will aim to increase the number of allotment sites associated with council properties in response to local demand.
Cemeteries	Areas for quiet contemplation and burying the dead. These areas are also linked to promoting wildlife conservation, biodiversity and cultural heritage	9 We will manage, in an efficient and cost-effective way, facilities related to burying and cremating the dead. We will also work with our partners to preserve and promote these facilities as resources for recreation, historical education, and improving local biodiversity.
Greenways	Access for walking, cycling and horse riding, and opportunities for wildlife	10 We will work with our partners to develop a network of community greenways and wildlife corridors across the city, linking existing areas of open space, landscape features and other public amenities where there is an identified benefit for local communities.
Amenity space	Areas for informal activities close to home and work that improve residential and other areas	11 We will work to provide and protect amenity open space across the city, which we will maintain to an appropriate standard for the benefit of local communities and to improve the overall appearance of the city.
Civic space	Areas providing a setting for civic buildings, public demonstrations and community events	12 We will work with our partners to make sure that civic spaces in the city centre are designed, managed and maintained to the highest standards for the benefit of people who live in and visit the city.

Table 2 – Park catchments

Type	Approx Size	Catchment	Characteristics	Policy Statement
Local	0.5 hectares	400 metres	<p>They are generally accessible on foot and mainly used for local community needs. They must be well maintained and provide safe environments for the community</p> <p>Essential characteristics: play area, grassland, disabled access, seating, litter and dog bins</p>	<p>13 We will provide and maintain high-quality, safe, secure, attractive, clean and well-maintained local parks in partnership with local people to meet the changing needs and hopes of local communities.</p>
District	8 or more hectares	1200 metres	<p>They will have specific resources or potential resources which will attract visitors from other parts of Belfast.</p> <p>Essential characteristics: public and private transport, toilets, events area, indoor facilities, grassland, signs, play facilities and semi-natural habitats</p> <p>Desirable characteristics: specific landscape features</p>	<p>14 We will provide high-quality, safe, secure, attractive, clean and well-maintained district parks that will play an important role in redeveloping surrounding districts and will be developed with our partners to meet the needs and hopes of the local community and visitors to the city.</p>
City	10 or more hectares	City wide	<p>They are of a significant size and can attract large numbers of visitors, have heritage importance and accommodate major events. They are among the main visitor attractions in Belfast, and will have a major effect on the quality of people's lives who live close by.</p> <p>They have all the essential characteristics of district parks with a superior quality of facilities.</p>	<p>15 We will work with all external stakeholders, and everyone else who is interested, to make sure that Belfast's city parks act as major tourist attractions for those visiting Belfast, and meet the needs and hopes of the people who live in Belfast and local communities close by.</p>
Country		Regional and national	<p>They are of a significant size with large areas of natural and semi-natural habitats supporting a range of wildlife. They can attract large numbers of visitors and accommodate appropriate major events. They attract tourists and have an important educational role.</p> <p>Essential characteristics: large natural areas rich in wildlife, good walking opportunities, historical features, visitor facilities, for example, car parks, appropriate access and signs.</p>	<p>16 We will work with all stakeholders, and everyone else who is interested, to make sure that the country parks we own are managed and developed to act as major environmental assets for people living in or visiting Belfast, consistent with current planning law as set out in the Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan.</p>

## How close is your park?

To find out which local communities are conveniently served by existing open spaces, and where there are any gaps, we mapped accessibility using catchment areas. Catchment areas are based on walking distances to each type of urban park – the smaller the open space and associated facilities, the shorter the walking distance.

Catchment areas for local and district parks have been mapped based on walking distances from the National Playing Field Association Guidelines.

Local parks should be within a five-minute walk from the communities they serve, and district parks should be no further than a 20-minute walk. Although city parks have city-wide catchments, and country parks have regional catchments, they will be considered as local parks to the people who live close by.

## Physical barriers

We revised catchment areas to take account of physical barriers such as rivers, main roads, railways and peace lines. The revised catchment areas identify where there are no spaces, or where the existing open spaces are poor. Districts that do not have suitable open spaces will become priorities for improvement, and this may depend on us buying more land, improving connections or setting up partnerships to invest in open space.

When planning open space, we will use our catchment information to find facilities that will meet community needs. We will apply this process to existing sites that are undergoing redevelopment.

### Open Space Catchment Areas



## What do we have, and how good is it?



Over 5,000 schoolchildren use the parks education services each year.



## Is open space in Belfast connected?

Recent history and political changes have made the physical map of Belfast as it is today, and to some extent will affect how it develops in the next 10 to 15 years. Before 1969, Belfast was considered to be a connected city. The troubles have created 'peace walls' and 'no-go' areas which have changed the physical map of the city.

Political division has had a major effect on a number of our properties. Open spaces close to 'interface' areas (spaces where communities of different cultural backgrounds come together) can act as buffer zones between communities in political conflict. When local tensions are high, some open spaces have become areas of conflict in their own right, such as Alexandra Park, the Waterworks and more recently Ballysillan Playing Fields.

Improving connections between the city's open spaces will also be a priority for us. We believe that linking open space using traffic-free, pedestrian and cycle corridors will increase the overall value of our public spaces.





Victoria Park is designated as a Ramsar site because of its wildlife habitats; its significance is protected internationally

## Why connect open space?

Connecting open space will give more local people the opportunity to access major open spaces across the city and avoid busy and potentially dangerous roads. A more connected network also helps to break down physical and social barriers between communities.

Open space can be connected by greenways (whose main function is pedestrian access) or by wildlife corridors (allowing species of wildlife to migrate).

The Regional Development Strategy for Northern Ireland highlights the need to 'enhance the quality of urban environments throughout the Metropolitan Area'. To meet this aim, the Planning Service says that there is a need to

'protect and enhance a network of open spaces, including country parks, landscape wedges, parks and community greenways'

*(Regional Development Strategy).*

## What do we have, and how good is it?



In planning terms, community greenways provide:

***'..places for recreation and exercise, cleaner air and a clean environment, opportunities for pedestrian and cycle routes and wildlife habitats. Greenways can include publicly-owned open space – parks, playing fields, school grounds and private lands, golf courses and farmlands. The courses of rivers through cities and towns offer particular potential for the development of community greenways.'*** (Draft BMAP 2015)

We and external agencies identified a range of potential greenways across the Belfast Metropolitan Area. We continue to promote the importance of these routes and will aim to develop partnerships that will help to create them. There is a complete list of potential community greenways in appendix 1. Research in the UK and Europe shows that these greenways must be designed and maintained to a high quality.



The International Rose Trials at Sir Thomas and Lady Dixon Park continue to be a major tourist attraction with around 70,000 visitors during Rose Week

## Open Space Planning Model

An exercise was carried out to identify how open spaces could be connected along existing watercourses (rivers, canals, streams and so on). Four major green corridors were identified that have the potential to connect the surrounding countryside with the city. They are:

- Northern – Cavehill to Belfast Lough;
- Southern – Lagan Valley to City Centre;
- Eastern – Titanic Quarter to Castlereagh Hills; and
- Western – Belfast Hills to City Centre.

A list of the key sites and their relationship to other environmental plans, such as the Belfast Master Plan, Arterial Routes programme and BMAP was recorded. (For more information, see appendix 4.)

Of the four corridors identified, the Lagan Valley corridor is the most accessible and widely used. Thousands of visitors enjoy it every year, and it sets the quality standard as to how the other corridors might be developed.

We do not own all the sites that have been identified, and not all of them are accessible to the public. Existing partnerships between local communities, key stakeholders, private landowners and the council must be developed further so we can achieve the potential of the north, west and eastern corridors and everyone can enjoy them.

### Open Space Planning Model



## What do we have, and how good is it?

### Belfast Master Plan and Open Space

The Belfast Master Plan (our Development Department) views all open space in Belfast as a single network and advises the need to improve its potential to create a more connected city. Specific recommendations are based on the following themes.

- Energising the core
- Connecting the middle city
- Promoting neighbourhood renewal
- Improving links to the Hills, Lough and Lagan Valley

The Master Plan confirms that the quality of public environments helps attract and keep investment within the city. This strategy can help to deliver the plan by:

- improving the visual appearance of the city by improving the quality of open spaces; and
- connecting open space that will link neighbourhoods and communities in Belfast.



### Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) Access Audit

We believe that everyone has the right to access and enjoy open space. We have assessed our open spaces based on the BT-sponsored Countryside for All Standard and Guidelines.

We are currently taking on board the recommendations made as a result of the assessment.

### Open Space Quality Audit

A quality audit was carried out on 111 council sites.

- Two city parks
- Nine district parks
- 36 local parks
- Five country parks
- Eight playing fields sites
- 42 playgrounds
- Nine cemeteries

Scoring was based on Green Flag standards and quality assessments from the Urban Parks Forum. A percentage quality score was awarded to each site, which will act as a standard for future improvement.

The audit recorded their overall condition and also awarded a heritage score to relevant sites based on historical features and built heritage. The audit also estimated the total cost of raising the standards across 111 sites. The findings of the audit are shown in appendix 2. A summary of the main findings follows.



## Main issues – city parks

We need to:

- improve the heritage scoring for the Botanic Gardens by restoring historic features;
- raise quality and heritage standards at Ormeau Park and promote tourist potential; and
- work out ratings for natural and cultural heritage.

## Main issues – district parks

We need to:

- improve quality scoring (average 43%);
- develop management plans that include issues such as security and appropriate facilities for the community;
- improve heritage scoring (average 34%) based on conservation standards, restoring historic features and character, and cultural events; and
- work out ratings for natural and cultural heritage.



We manage 19 open space sites that have a high heritage value in the city



## Main issues – local parks

We need to:

- improve quality scoring (average 38%);
- improve the overall condition of sites (19% recorded as good);
- improve heritage scoring (average 14%);
- develop management plans that include issues such as security and appropriate facilities for the community; and
- work out ratings for natural and cultural heritage.



## Main issues – country parks

We need to:

- improve quality scoring (average 44%);
- develop management plans, including issues such as signs, historic features, cultural events, public information and habitat management;
- improve links to surrounding environmental resources;
- tackle antisocial behaviour in Cavehill Country Park;
- improve heritage scoring (average 45%); and
- work out ratings for natural and cultural heritage.



## Main issues – playing fields

We need to:

- improve quality scoring (average 42%);
- assess and meet increasing public demand;
- improve access;
- develop management plans, including issues such as signs, access and promotion; and
- increase the level of community involvement in managing sites.

## Main issues – playgrounds

We need to:

- increase the number of playgrounds in good condition (only 5% are currently recorded as good);
- tackle antisocial behaviour on problem sites;
- review the rising cost of maintenance; and
- develop management plans for all sites.



We manage  
36 Local Parks,  
9 District Parks and  
2 City Parks  
in Belfast

# What you told us

Consultation



### Consultation

General consultation about our parks and open spaces has been ongoing for a number of years. The following is a summary of those findings.

### Summary of the park users' survey

This detailed survey is carried out every two years. A summary of the findings from the 2002 survey shows that:

- most users visit parks to walk or relax;
- the environment must be pleasant and well maintained;
- local parks have the worst reputation among users;
- users feel open spaces are under strain from a large population;
- people would like city and district parks to be improved; and
- 75% of the people who responded said that they would like to see a friends' group set up to help develop local parks.

Park users are most dissatisfied with standards at local levels. The worst three recorded aspects in local parks were that:

- almost 44% of people thought levels of staff presence were poor;
- almost 50% of people felt seating was poor; and
- 66% felt the toilets were poor.



The first reference to public parks in Belfast is recorded in the Corporation minutes of October 1865



### Cemetery users' survey

The cemetery users' survey shows that people were generally satisfied with standards but we must:

- improve the overall standard of facilities, including seating, water taps, toilet facilities and bins;
- work with our partners to improve overall security;
- improve standards of council maintenance; and
- increase the presence of our staff at the site.



## Non-users' survey

The non-users' survey identified why some people used local facilities less than twice a year. This survey, carried out every two years, shows that the main reasons for people not using our open spaces were:

- open space provided by others was more attractive;
- facilities for children provided in other places were better;
- there are too many undesirable people in local parks; and
- the idea that some council parks and open spaces are unsafe.



## Child users' survey

Central government research confirms that most children's play does not take place on formal play areas (DCMS – Getting Serious about Play). Our last survey of children in 2002 revealed that:

- there has been an overemphasis placed on creating formal playgrounds;
- current facilities do little to stimulate the small percentage of children who use them; and
- children interviewed prefer to play in informal green spaces and local streets.

## Corporate Survey 2003

In 2003, our Public Consultation Survey showed that:

- levels of satisfaction with most council services have fallen since 2001 and are generally below Northern Ireland averages; and
- 58% of people felt that we are not keeping pace with resident demands.

## Best value – parks and open spaces

Consultation through the best-value review highlighted the need to:

- raise the strategic profile of open space;
- improve the current standard of the parks service;
- improve safety in open spaces;
- encourage more people to join friends' groups; and
- increase public awareness of the benefits of open spaces.

The review confirmed that developing and putting into practice the open-space strategy was essential in helping to create an attractive, healthy and environmentally friendly city.

## What you told us about the strategy

We consulted staff, the general public and stakeholders when we developed this strategy. This consultation was the most important part of the process. We believe that this strategy must reflect the hopes of the local community and the organisations we work with. We met with various funding groups, statutory organisations and open-space friends' groups during 2004. We also published a short consultation paper which allowed everyone to comment on the main challenges facing open spaces in Belfast. Consultation has shown that:

- our statutory, voluntary and community colleagues are in general agreement with our strategic themes;
- the consultation paper identified areas of joined-up working, accompanied by a desire to do so;
- you agree that there are finite resources available to deal with important issues; and
- you feel that better open spaces can have a positive effect on the wider community.

Your views and priorities have helped to develop this strategy. The following table presents a summary of these.

Rank	What do parks offer?	How can we improve the heritage value?	How can we encourage more use?	How can we improve safety?
1	Passive recreation	City-wide education	Improved security	Warden service
2	Pleasant surroundings	Promote heritage features	Improved access	Local ownership
3	Children's play	More community events	Less dog mess	More users
4	Relaxation	Improve natural heritage	More events	Safer design
5	Wildlife	Produce management plans	More toilets and seating	More resources
6	Sports	Source more funding	More sports pitches	



Each year over 350 outdoor events take place in parks



## Implications for the open-space strategy

Equality issues should be an important factor in the way we design and manage open space. Under equality law, consultation with Section 75 groups identified many issues that relate to specific open spaces. We believe these concerns are best tackled by mainstreaming equality issues when redeveloping and managing individual sites.

Based on a broader analysis of responses, we have identified a number of key aims for this strategy.

- **Community involvement**
- **Public safety**
- **Multiple use and function**
- **Marketing and communication**
- **Quality and standards**



## Community involvement

There was a clear call for us to help more local people manage their local parks and open spaces. Through this strategy, we aim to:

- encourage more community-based events;
- help communities get funding for open space;
- arrange more management agreements at a local level;
- increase the number of users at a local level;
- increase the number of people using open space; and
- improve relationships between communities.



Numbers attending events organised directly by Parks & Cemeteries was estimated at 100,000 during 2004





### Policy statement 17: Community consultation

**We will consult local interest and community groups as part of the continuing improvement of delivering our services for all our properties to meet the needs and hopes of the people who live in the city.**

## Public safety

The public believe that some open space is unsafe because of antisocial behaviour and byelaws not being enforced consistently. Consultation confirmed that we need to:

- build safety into the design of parks;
- increase levels of security and surveillance;
- increase community involvement;
- hold more events;
- improve enforcement of dog-fouling regulations; and
- introduce a park warden service.

## Multiple use and function

People want to see greater use being made of open space to include the needs of a range of different groups. Consultation confirmed that a wider range of facilities and events should be developed within our open spaces to cater for:

- children and young people;
- elderly people;
- people with a disability;
- ethnic-minority groups; and
- visitors and tourists coming to the city.



## Marketing and communication

You felt that we do not communicate and promote our open spaces enough. You told us that we do not communicate the wider cultural and historical context of open space. You would like more information about open space in terms of location, facilities, function and heritage.

## Quality and standards

You told us that there is now an opportunity to improve the standard and quality of open space in the city. We must also consider that the way we manage these spaces is a contributing factor in improving their appeal.

## Principles for the strategy

In conclusion, consultation has identified that the following principles will help us to put this strategy into practice.

- Effective partnerships
- Marketing and communication
- Quality and standards



The Belfast Botanic and Horticultural Society established the Belfast Botanic Garden on the present site in 1828

Risk

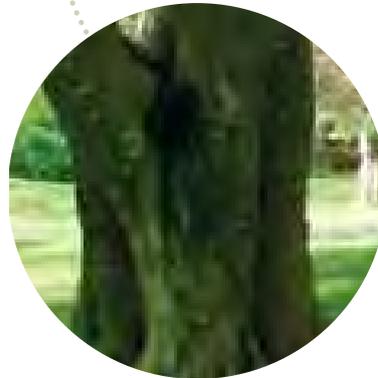
We carried out an assessment to identify risks that will affect the way we deliver this strategy. We have categorised the risks under the following five headings.

- Lack of use
- Communication
- Strategy and management structures
- Financial and funding – internal
- Financial and funding – external

For more information on how we manage risk, see appendix 3.



The oldest tree in Belfast is an Oak in the Lagan Valley Regional Park dating back to 1641



# What we plan to do

Strategic themes and aims



Our vision:

to make good-quality open space part of living in, working in and visiting Belfast.

Our strategy is made up of four themes supported by the following three principles.

- **Partnerships:**  
working effectively with independent stakeholders to deliver co-ordinated and linked open spaces.
- **Marketing and communication:**  
making sure that we communicate effectively with all key stakeholders, internally and externally, and promote open space.
- **Quality and standards:**  
delivering high-quality open space for the benefit of people who live in and visit Belfast.



Our themes and principles have emerged from consultation and a review of current thinking on improving open spaces. They will provide a framework for improving open spaces in the city during the next eight years. The diagram on the following page outlines this framework.



We have 45 listed built/architectural features in our open spaces



## Strategic theme: People and community

### Helping local people to take control of their open spaces

This theme aims to encourage more local people to take control of open spaces. This approach is based on:

- involving local people;
- creating a safe and healthy local environment with well-designed open space; and
- developing vibrant and creative local cultures, encouraging community pride.

Through this strategy, we will work to support local groups and to progress towards this aim.

## Strategic theme: Our heritage

### Protecting and improving open space that supports and promotes our natural, built and social heritage

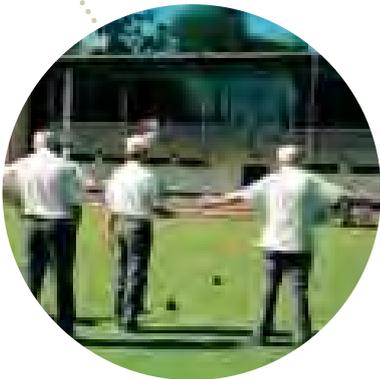
Open space is a vital part of our natural, built and cultural heritage. Open space in Belfast contains a range of important architectural and historic features, habitats and species. Open space also contributes to the social history and culture of the city.

This strategy presents us with an opportunity to improve and promote all three elements of our heritage, not only for residents but for the many visitors who come to the city.





The council spends around £12 million every year providing and maintaining parks and open spaces



### Strategic theme: Healthier places

#### **Providing a network of open space that we can enjoy and that will help to improve the quality of your life**

We are committed to continually improving the health of people who live in Belfast. Current concerns about our general health are linked to a reduction in the number of people taking part in outdoor activity. Through this strategy, we will promote open space as a free resource for recreation and leisure. We also aim to encourage more people to use open space by improving facilities, standards and accessibility.

Building on existing partnerships that aim to improve the general health of people who live in Belfast is important, for example, Belfast Education and Library Board and the Health Trusts. These partnerships include the 'Well Being Centre' that is being built at the Grove Playing Fields in North Belfast and the successful multi-sports initiative at the Waterworks.

Through this strategy, we will contribute to the Healthy Cities Partnership and work to develop recreational and educational programmes that will raise awareness of the health benefits associated with open space.



## Strategic theme: Safer space

### Creating and maintaining open space where we all can feel at ease

Increased levels of crime and antisocial behaviour are a major concern for people who live in Belfast. The fear of crime causes a lack of confidence in neighbourhoods and their associated facilities. Within many open spaces we see the physical signs of vandalism and antisocial behaviour. These problems result in local people becoming reluctant to use their parks and playgrounds, especially in the evenings. Through this strategy, we aim to provide open space which will offer safer environments for local people to control and enjoy.

### Operating principle: Partnerships

One purpose of this strategy is to communicate our vision for open space in the city. Through this strategy, we will improve public space in Belfast and the quality of life for all of our residents.

We realise that we are a major environmental stakeholder in the city, but recognise that many other organisations are providers and managers of open space, for example, Belfast Education and Library Board, Northern Ireland Housing Executive, DRD Roads Service, Belfast Regeneration Office, Lagan Valley Corporation, health trusts and non-government organisations.

Consultation has highlighted many common goals, and through this strategy we will enter into discussions with these organisations to improve aspects of open space such as environmental quality and links with local groups.

As well as local communities and statutory organisations, we recognise the benefits of working with organisations such as the Lagan Valley Regional Park, the Ulster Wildlife Trust and Groundwork NI.

**Operating principle: Marketing and communication**

Our research has identified that marketing and communication of open space and its benefits is currently a weakness. This strategy has identified this area as a priority improvement in terms of education and relationships with local communities and organisations.

**Operating principle: Quality and standards**

The success of this strategy will depend on improving the standard and quality of the open spaces we deliver. Our open-space quality audit highlights the need for many of our facilities to improve. Consultation also supports the idea that poor standards prevent people from using open space. It is critical to the success of the strategy that we prepare maintenance and management plans for all sites based on our four strategic themes.



**Policy statement 18: Management plans**

**We will manage open space in an economic, efficient, effective way by using individual management plans for each of our sites.**