

A photograph of a park in autumn. A paved path leads through a grassy area with several large trees showing yellow and orange leaves. In the background, a white gazebo with a dark roof stands on a lawn. The scene is framed by a white, jagged, arrow-like border.

# Belfast Open Spaces Strategy

Energising  
**Belfast**



**Belfast**





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# Summary – Belfast Open Spaces Strategy

Belfast benefits from a wide range of open spaces. From the beautiful Victorian setting of the Botanic Gardens, to the natural grandeur of Cave Hill Country Park, from the lawns of the City Hall Gardens, to the smallest of local play areas, they all add to the overall quality of our environment and contribute to our city's own unique identity.

Covering around a quarter of the city's total area around 2,390 hectares (ha), our open spaces are a significant resource and many have been awarded Green Flag status in recognition for their good management and active community involvement.

Belfast's residents have told us they are proud of the city's natural and built environment and that we need to take care of these natural assets. Protecting, developing and improving access to good quality open space for everyone improves people's health and wellbeing, supports urban wildlife and biodiversity and encourages investment in the city's economy.

## *Strategy development*

To help us produce this strategy we established a Strategy Advisory Group which was made up of statutory, community and voluntary organisations. We also set up an internal Strategy Oversight Steering Group made up of officers from across the council to provide oversight and guidance. These groups created a long-term vision for the future of Belfast's open spaces, in line with the aspirations of the Belfast Agenda and Local Development Plan (LDP).

In 2018 we carried out an open space audit which assessed open space provision, accessibility and future actions based on the city's growth strategy. We used this to help set an ambitious vision for our open spaces.

To make sure that existing and new open spaces are fit for the future, we established a suite of seven guiding strategic principles, providing the roadmap for achieving the vision. Belfast's open spaces will:

- SP1. Provide welcoming shared spaces
- SP2. Improve connectivity
- SP3. Improve health and wellbeing
- SP4. Support place-making and enhance the built environment
- SP5. Increase resilience to climate change
- SP6. Protect and enhance the natural environment
- SP7. Be celebrated and support learning

Our vision, is that by 2035...

**Belfast will have a well-connected network of high-quality open spaces recognised for the value and benefits they provide to everyone who lives in, works in and visits our city.**

## ***Strategy delivery***

We have identified a range of opportunities and headline actions to be delivered over the next five years which are aligned to the seven strategic principles above. To achieve our vision, open spaces must be managed collaboratively, as one of the city's most important assets. We will continue to work closely with our partners and stakeholders to help realise our vision for Belfast's open spaces.

## ***Strategy review***

We will manage and monitor the audit database of open spaces with our partners and stakeholders. We will regularly review progress of the delivery plan, complete a full review of the strategy in 2024 and agree the next phase of actions.



*Source: Belfast City Council*

# Introduction

*Belfast will be a city re-imagined and re-energised through our open spaces.*

Open spaces provide a wide range of health, economic, social, environmental and cultural benefits that help to make Belfast more sustainable and liveable. Residents of Belfast have told us that the city's landscape setting and natural environment are some of its key strengths and that we need to work better to maximise their benefits. This strategy sets out a vision with strategic principles for protecting, connecting and enhancing existing and new open space.

Our previous strategy for open spaces – 'Your City, Your Space' 2005, led to many improvements and successes; through this strategy we:

- invested £150m in our open spaces network;
- achieved 19 Green Flag Awards;
- attracted funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) and European streams;
- increased numbers and participation levels at local events and outreach programmes;
- constructed and developed the Connswater Community Greenway;
- increased the number of friend's groups within our open spaces; and
- delivered a range of physical improvements across our open spaces network in partnership with statutory, community and voluntary sector.

Our Community Plan, the Belfast Agenda sets out a shared vision and commitment across the public, private and community and voluntary sectors to create a better quality of life for all. Comprising over a quarter of the city, our open spaces are vital in delivering the Belfast Agenda's vision. We are responsible for land use planning in the city, including our network of open spaces. Our LDP sets out the policy framework for delivering significant growth across the city by 2035. Growth presents opportunities to improve our open spaces and their connectivity. This strategy was developed with the help of a wide range of partners and stakeholders and builds on much of the good work already completed.

We continue to rely on our open spaces to help make Belfast one of the most liveable cities in the world, a city re-imagined and re-energised.

## Definition of open space

For the purposes of this strategy, open spaces are defined as *'land where the primary function is related to their community, amenity, recreation, play and sport value; whether in public or private ownership'*. This includes parks, playing fields, play areas and civic space. These open spaces may also have secondary biodiversity benefits and form part of a wider 'green infrastructure' network. Details of Belfast's green infrastructure are set out in the council's Green and Blue Infrastructure Plan (GBIP). The GBIP provides a spatial framework for a much broader range of spaces, including natural areas and water bodies, to support the effective functioning of natural processes and the ecosystem services they provide.



# Policy framework

The importance of open space is enshrined in Northern Irish regional planning policy. This strategy is aligned to regional and local policies and strategies. A summary of these is outlined on the following pages.

## ***Regional policy***

The Programme for Government (PfG) is the highest-level strategy for the Northern Ireland Executive. It sets outcomes and measures to help deliver improved wellbeing for everyone; tackle inequality and drive economic growth. Open spaces provide a range of health, economic, social, environmental and cultural benefits that contribute to its delivery.

The Executive's Regional Development Strategy (RDS) 2035 recognises the importance of open spaces and specifically highlights the need to 'protect and enhance the network of open spaces in the BMUA (Belfast Metropolitan Urban Area)'. The RDS is supported by the Strategic Planning Policy Statement (SPPS) which sets out regional planning policies. The SPPS must be taken into account in the preparation of all LDPs and inform decisions on individual planning applications and appeals.

The SPPS sets out the requirements for councils when developing an open spaces strategy, which states that 'there will be a policy presumption against the loss of open space to competing land uses in LDPs irrespective of its physical condition and appearance'. The SPPS also highlights the importance of integrating open spaces within new development and advises councils to 'assess provision in the plan area against the National Playing Fields Association's (NPFA) 'six-acre standard'. In 2015, the NPFA was replaced by Fields in Trust (FiT) which included additional typologies.

The SPPS is supported by a number of topic-based Planning Policy Statements (PPS) which provide more detail on how policy should be interpreted and implemented across Northern Ireland. A number of the PPS have implications for open space provision, including PPS 2 'Natural Heritage', PPS 7 'Quality Residential Environments' and PPS 21 'Sustainable Development in the Countryside', but most notably PPS 8 Open Space, Sport and Outdoor Recreation, includes a range of policies relating to protection of existing spaces and delivery of new spaces. It requires that, in general, 10% of site area should be given to open space for new residential development, rising to 15% for strategic sites over 300 units or 15hectares.

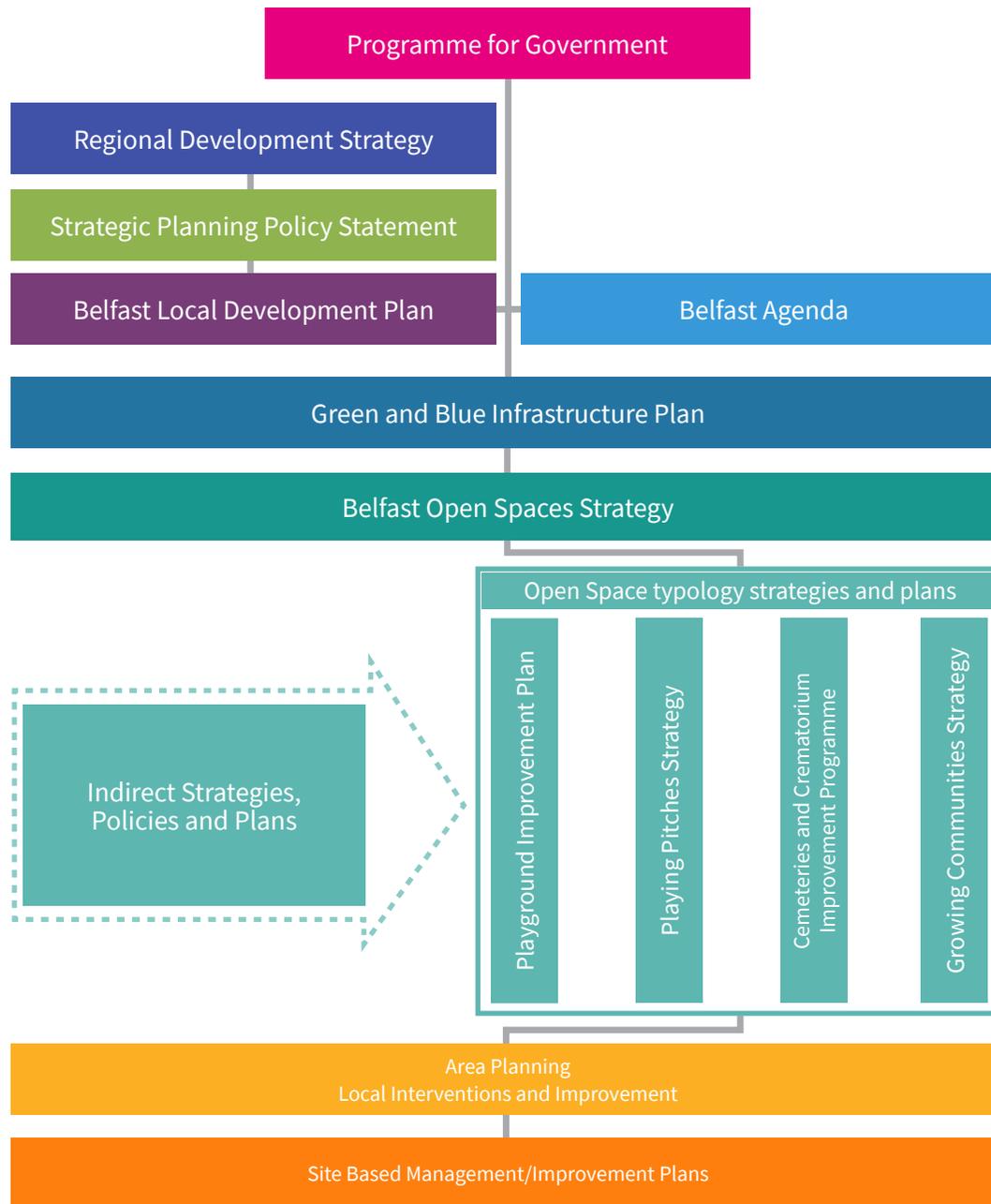
## ***Local policy***

As part of Local Government Reform (LGR), we now have a 'community planning' duty to provide a coordinated framework for public service delivery across services such as public health, education, social services and sports. The Belfast Agenda is aligned to the PfG, setting out the strategic direction for Belfast, including a vision for the future and the outcomes to be achieved.

Working within the policy framework set by the Executive's RDS, our LDP will set out policies to deliver the spatial aspects of the Belfast Agenda. This strategy provides the evidence base to support policies within the LDP. In accordance with the SPPS, our policy approach is to protect all open space, make improvements and to improve access to open space.

Using our planning powers gained through LGR, we now ensure new residential development is supported by appropriate open space infrastructure. Our Developer Contributions Framework sets out the circumstances in which new or enhanced open space should be secured through the planning applications process.

The GBIP supports the LDP and provides a framework that also includes natural areas and water bodies. At the local level, we will continue to work with stakeholders and communities to develop area-based plans and interventions to improve the provision, accessibility and quality of open spaces. These plans will align to the strategic principles, opportunities and headline actions at a local level.



### Summary points

- Capitalise on the potential for open space to deliver multiple benefits.
- Planning powers provide us with the opportunity to improve open space quality and provision.
- Our existing open space network needs to be protected, improved and enhanced to meet growing demand.
- Planning policy enables us to secure developer contributions where they are necessary to mitigate the impact of new development on open space infrastructure.
- Continue to work with our partners, stakeholders and local communities to improve our open space network.

Figure 1. Policy Framework

# Benefits of open space

The Belfast Agenda sets out an ambitious vision for Belfast by 2035, underpinned by five outcomes to be achieved:

1. Everyone in Belfast benefits from a **thriving and prosperous economy**;
2. Belfast is a **welcoming, safe, fair and inclusive city for all**;
3. Everyone in Belfast **fulfils their potential**;
4. Everyone in Belfast experiences **good health and wellbeing**; and
5. Belfast is a **vibrant, attractive, connected and environmentally sustainable city**.

The LDP provides our spatial vision and plan that will help deliver the Belfast Agenda. Evidence suggests that well-designed, high quality open spaces are vital in creating a healthy and liveable city.

## 1. Thriving and prosperous economy

High quality open spaces help attract and retain higher value businesses and have shown to add a premium to commercial development of around 3% across the UK (although estimates vary from 1-9%)<sup>1</sup>. Belfast is seeking to attract 46,000 new, high quality jobs to the city by 2035. The city centre, Harbour Estate, Belfast Port, North Foreshore, Titanic Quarter and other iconic projects will remain the focus of economic investment.

Belfast is a growing tourism destination, with over 1.5 million visitors to the city per year. High quality open spaces help retain visitors for longer and in turn this increases visitor spending. It is important that we protect and enhance these spaces, particularly in the city centre. Many of our parks and open spaces such as Botanic Gardens, Lagan Valley Regional Park and the Connswater Community Greenway are tourist attractions in their own right.

## 2. Welcoming, safe, fair and inclusive for all

The quality of open space has a direct relationship with how people feel about a place. Where people perceive local open spaces as high quality, they are generally more satisfied with their neighbourhood, and are likely to feel safer, more secure and become more active<sup>2</sup>. This reinforces a sense of place and creates opportunities for socialising and local events. With increased activity there is more natural surveillance which in turn helps to reduce levels of anti-social behaviour (ASB).

## 3. Fulfilling potential

We need to invest in our open spaces, so that they can fulfil their potential. It's all about valuing, enjoying and helping to manage these spaces and using them to their full potential. It is important to involve the community, groups and volunteers, to help us maintain, promote and shape the future development of our parks and open spaces. Our open spaces are also important educational resources that can support lifelong learning.

## 4. Good health and wellbeing

Open spaces are important for health and mental wellbeing. Most open space users are involved in passive recreation activities including walking, dog walking, cycling and running. Obesity is still one of the most important public health challenges facing Northern Ireland: 41% of those aged 65-74 were overweight, a further 29% were obese<sup>3</sup> and estimated to cost our economy £370 million per year<sup>4</sup>. Although there have been improvements in recent years significant areas of health deprivation remain in Belfast. These health inequalities correlate with economic inactivity, sedentary lifestyles, drinking and smoking. Overall better health is related to access to green space regardless of socio-economic status<sup>5</sup>. Being physically active for 30 minutes a day can directly reduce the risk of strokes, cardiovascular disease, obesity, cancer and Type 2 diabetes. In NI, 65% of adults do not achieve the recommended levels of physical activity<sup>6</sup>. People who live within 500 metres of accessible green space are 24% more

likely to engage in increased physical activity and meet the 30 minute target<sup>7</sup>. The health and wellbeing benefits of parks and open spaces are not restricted to active recreation. Simply spending time in a green space with contact to nature has proven benefits in terms of mental health, wellbeing and happiness.

## 5. Vibrant, attractive, connected and environmentally sustainable

Attractive and vibrant spaces help support the economy and improve how people perceive the quality of their neighbourhood. These are important factors in creating prosperous communities and improving social activity.

As the regional centre, Belfast draws commuters from a wide catchment area, the vast majority of whom use private vehicles. Among weekday commuters, 52% of workers move through the city in private cars or vans, whereas 16% use public transport and only 3% cycle<sup>8</sup>. Congestion, air quality issues<sup>9</sup> and the use of climate change inducing fossil fuels are already key challenges for the city to address. These are likely to increase due to the planned population growth, estimated to generate an additional 10,000 journeys per-hour during the peak period.

In relation to environmental sustainability, rain water falling on hard urban areas quickly runs off, picking up pollutants and either enters the drainage network or discharges into the natural environment. Open spaces incorporating sustainable drainage systems (SuDS) helps slow water flow, enhance water quality and improve natural habitats and amenity value.

Biodiversity is the cornerstone of robust ecosystems and the beneficial services they provide, such as pollination of crops, improvements to water, soil, air quality and climate regulation. Open spaces provide great opportunities for integrating a variety of trees and vegetation to diversify urban habitats and support a wider variety of species. Effective management can help create attractive spaces that allow sensitive species to thrive and people to have space for recreation.

### Summary points

- Open spaces provide a wide range of social, economic and environmental benefits that support the outcomes of the Belfast Agenda and the LDP.
- Good design and ongoing management help engender civic and local pride, animate open space and support good community relations.
- Easy access to open space increases usage and participation in activities shown to improve health and wellbeing.
- High quality open spaces help attract investment and retain visitors, providing economic benefits for the city.
- Open spaces provide the opportunity to take a holistic approach to SuDS including providing land that slows water flow, improving Belfast's resilience to flooding.
- Creation of habitat areas within open spaces helps species move across the city, supporting biodiversity and eco-system services.

1 - Eftac and Sheffield Hallam University (2013) Green infrastructure's contribution to economic growth: a review.

2 - CABE Space and DCMS (2010) Community green

3 - Health Survey for NI (2015-2016)

4 - Safefood (2012) The cost of overweight and obesity on the island of Ireland

5 - Marmot Review (2010)

6 - Sport NI (2010) The Northern Ireland Sport and Physical Activity Survey

7 - Defra (2010) What nature can do for you

8- Belfast City Council (2017) Smart Belfast Collaborative Challenge – Transport

9 - Belfast City Council's Belfast Air Quality Action Plan 2015-2020 designates four Air Quality Management Areas where emissions have breached EU regulations. These are, 1. M1-Westlink AQMA, 2. Cromac Street and Albertbridge Street AQMA, 3. Upper Newtownards Road AQMA, 4. Ormeau Road AQMA

## Provision of open spaces

This section summarises the city's current open spaces network, describing different types of open spaces, their extent, distribution and accessibility. It also outlines how the quality of open spaces is assessed and some operational management issues. Open space provision is measured against best practice standards and the growth strategy within the Belfast Agenda and the LDP.

We have developed a comprehensive database of open spaces with a range of external partners. Where possible, we have collected information on the location, type, size and ownership of both public and private open spaces. There are, however, some limitations to this data and we will continue to work with our partners to review and update this information.



*Source: Belfast City Council*

## Belfast today

Sitting at the head of Belfast Lough, Belfast is positioned on low lying fluvial deposits. It is situated within a bowl of upland created by the Belfast and Castlereagh Hills, divided by the River Lagan flowing down to the north through the city and into the lough. Belfast has a population of approximately 339,600<sup>10</sup>, it is a regional economic powerhouse, with a growing concentration of skilled jobs and a significant retail catchment of around 600,000 people. Belfast is fast becoming one of the UK's main tourist destinations, attracting over 1.5m visitors a year.

We are one of the youngest cities in Europe, with a third of our residents under 21. We have a growing older population, which by 2035 will grow from 15% to 20%. Despite being ranked within the top five cities in the UK for quality of life, reflecting a thriving cultural and social scene, the city has significant pockets of deprivation and health inequalities, resulting in major disparities between our communities. We are still a city with challenges and despite our progress in community relations, social and physical barriers are still visible throughout the city.

Figure 2 shows the Belfast City Council boundary urban area of Belfast.

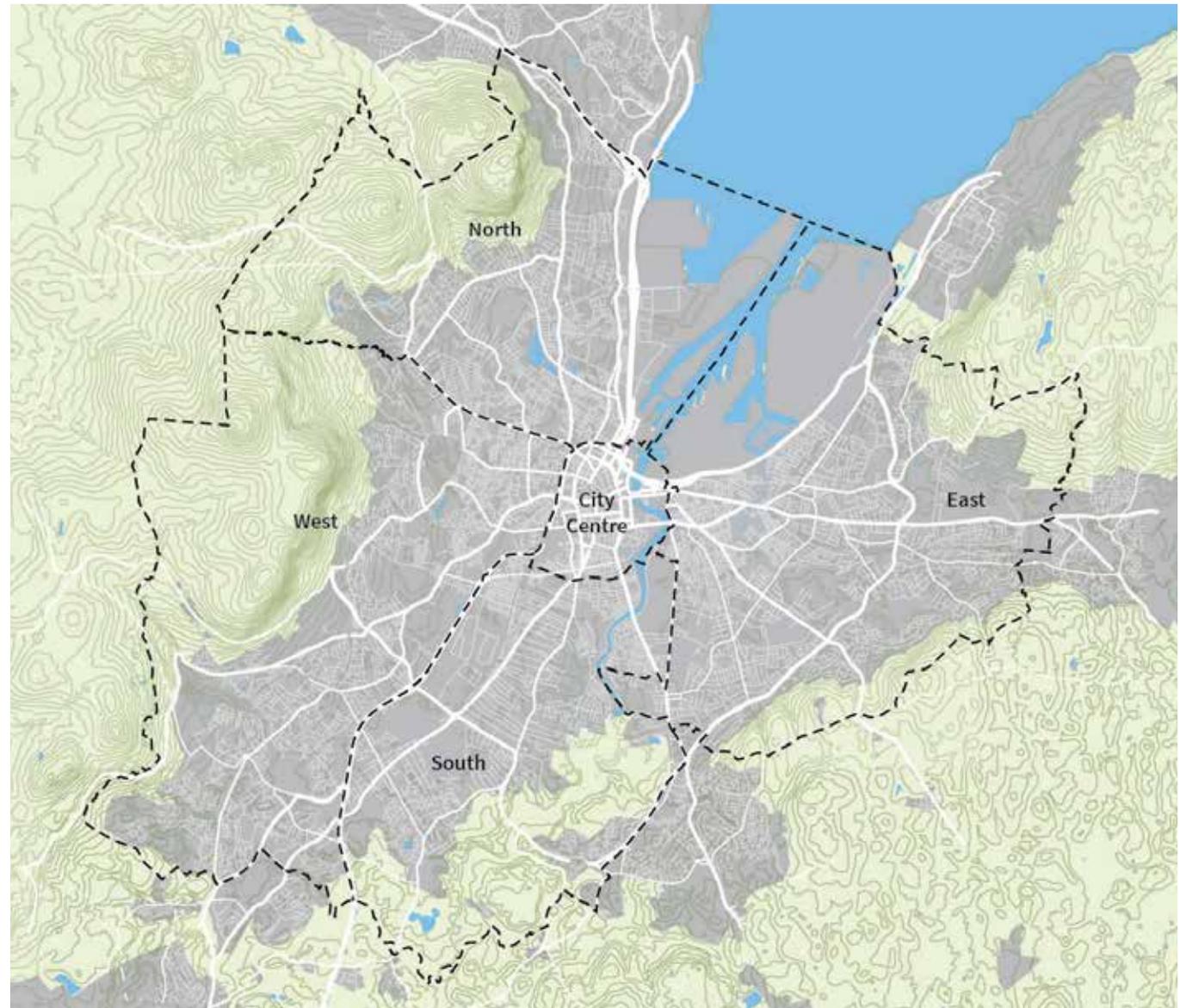
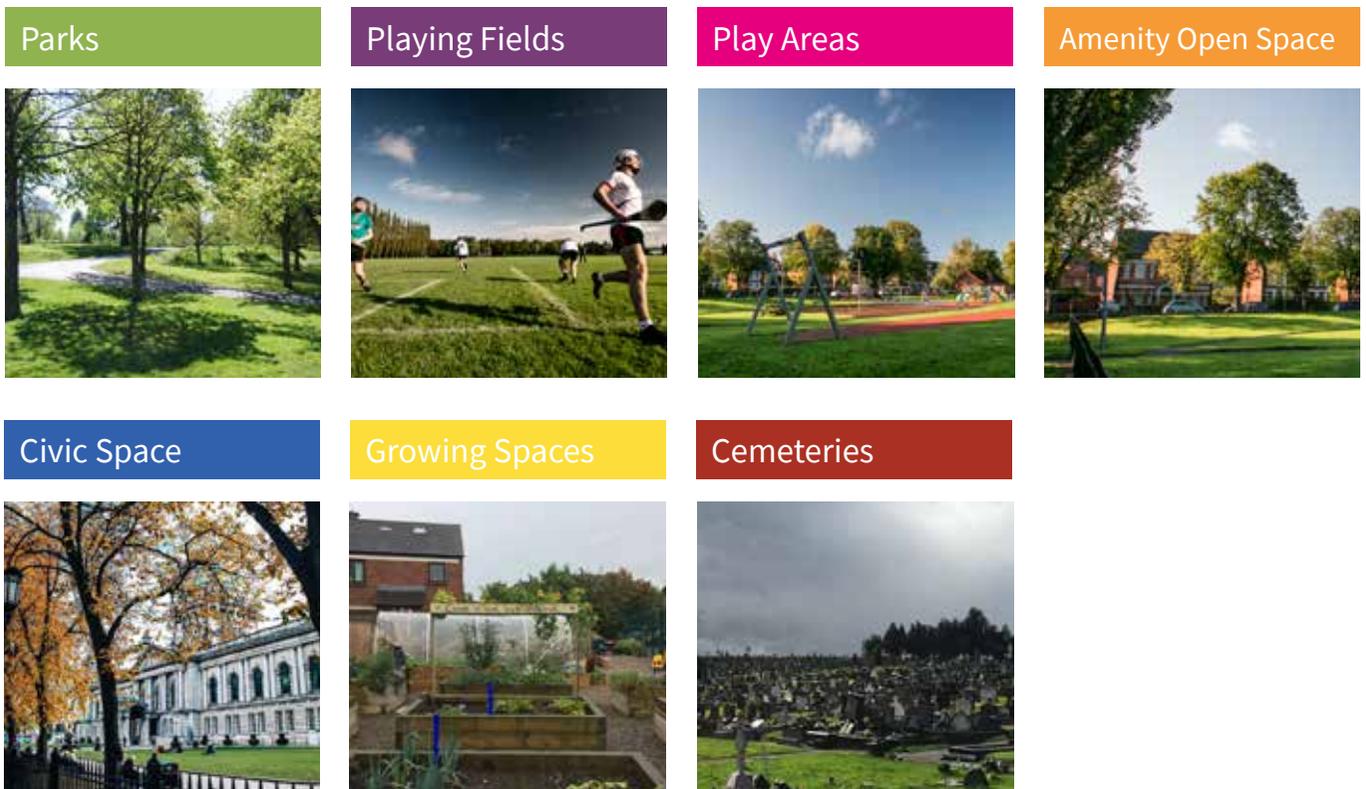


Figure 2. Belfast City Council (BCC) boundary

## Types of open space

Open spaces are defined as ‘land where the primary function is related to their community/amenity value, offering opportunities for play, recreation and sport whether in public or private ownership’<sup>11</sup>. These open spaces may also have secondary biodiversity benefits and form part of a wider ‘green infrastructure’ network. A total of seven open space typologies have been used, each having a variety of uses. The types of open spaces referred to throughout this strategy are summarised in Table 1. Other spaces, including water bodies, greenways, waterways and private gardens are discussed in detail in the GBIP.

The RDS 2035 also highlights the importance of ‘greenways’, which are segregated walking and cycling routes, and requires their protection and enhancement as part of the network of open spaces in the BMUA. Although primarily designed as movement corridors, these linkages are becoming important destinations in their own right for example Connswater Community Greenway. They will play an increasingly important role, allowing people to move safely between open spaces, to destinations in the city and out to the countryside and will be explored further in SP2 and as part of the GBIP.



Source: Belfast City Council

11 - PPS 8 defines open spaces as ‘all open space of public value, including not just land, but also inland bodies of water such as rivers, canals, lakes and reservoirs which offer important opportunity for sports and outdoor recreation and can act as visual amenity’. This strategy focuses on land, whereas the GBIP incorporates a broader suite of open spaces in line with PPS8.

Open Space Typologies			
Type	Sub- type	Description	Ownership / responsibility
<b>Parks</b>	Country parks	Significant open spaces, with large areas of natural or semi natural landscapes supporting a range of wildlife. They are publicly accessible by public transport and attract large numbers of visitors and tourists. They provide a range of facilities and heritage features offering recreational, ecological, landscape, cultural or green infrastructure benefits.	
	City parks	Parks such as Botanic Gardens and Ormeau Park; these are formal open spaces of a significant size that offer a combination of facilities and heritage features at the sub-regional level. They are among the main visitor attractions in Belfast and are popular with tourists and visitors to the city. They are accessible by public transport and have a superior quality of facilities.	Belfast City Council is responsible for the vast majority of parks. We have a dedicated team of Park Officers in each of the city's five areas who manage and maintain the parks and liaise with local communities.
	District parks 1200m walking catchment (approx. 15min walk)	Large to medium areas of open space that provide a landscape setting with a variety of natural features providing a wide range of activities, including outdoor sports facilities and playing fields, children's play for different age groups and informal recreation pursuits, for example Falls Park and Victoria Park.	The Stormont Estate is managed by another public body.
	Local parks 400m walking catchment (approx. 5min walk)	Serve the immediate neighbourhood as accessible green spaces. They may contain courts or pitches, children's play, sitting-out areas and nature conservation areas. They are usually accessible by foot and are mainly used by the local community, for example Dr Pitt Park, Rev Robert Bradford Memorial Park, Loughside Park, Drumglass Park and Glencairn Park.	

Table 1. Open space typologies

## Open Space Typologies

Type	Sub- type	Description	Ownership / responsibility
<b>Playing fields</b>	Public playing fields	Publicly owned natural or artificial surfaces (synthetic) used for sport and recreation. They include outdoor sports facilities pitches or playing fields.	Owned by Belfast City Council for public use.
	Private playing fields	Similar to public playing fields, but privately owned.	Privately owned with restricted public access.
	School and university playing fields	Similar to public playing fields, but owned and managed by schools and universities. For public liability and security reasons educational grounds are not accessible to the general public. Often schools allow community use of the sports facilities for a fee but this cannot be guaranteed.	Owned by the Department of Education and the universities. These spaces have restricted public access.
	Other outdoor sports provision	Natural or artificial surfaces either publicly or privately owned, used for sport and recreation. They include tennis courts, bowling greens and athletics tracks.	Public or privately owned
	Golf courses	Natural landscaped spaces either publicly or privately owned or used for golf.	Public or privately owned
<b>Play areas (adopted in the the Belfast City Council Strategy for Equipped Playgrounds 2008).</b>	Local equipped areas for play (LEAP) 400m walking catchment (around 5 min walk)	Accessible local playgrounds containing up to five types of equipment; may also contain small ball games areas.	Belfast City Council own most play areas. However, there are a couple of play areas that have been installed on private sites. These facilities remain publicly accessible.
	Neighbourhood equipped areas for play (NEAP) (Type 1 – 3) 1,000m catchment (around 13 min walk)	Accessible local playgrounds containing up to five types of equipment; may also contain small ball games areas.	
	Multi use games areas (MUGA) (Type 1 – 3) 700m catchment (around 9 min walk)	Non-bookable, accessible hardstanding or polymeric surfaced small pitches used informally for soccer or basketball.	
	Skatepark	Specialised concrete zone for skateboarding and other urban sports, for example rollerblading, scooters.	
	BMX Tracks	Dedicated areas or circuits for BMX sports or cycling.	

## Open Space Typologies

Type	Sub- type	Description	Ownership / responsibility
<b>Amenity open space</b>		Areas of landscaped green spaces that provide natural surfaces and shaded areas for informal play and passive recreation. They enhance residential and commercial areas.	There are a number of bodies responsible for amenity space including Department for Infrastructure, NI Housing Executive, Department for Communities, Belfast City Council and private landowners.
<b>Civic space</b>		High quality hard or soft landscaped areas that have public value and can be used for larger civic events. Generally located within or near to the city centre, for example Custom House Square, Belfast City Hall Lawns, Cathedral Gardens.	Civic space is often associated with civic buildings. Belfast's civic spaces are owned by Belfast City Council and the Department for Communities.
<b>Growing spaces</b>	Allotments	Secure sites providing individual plots for hire, offering opportunities for residents to grow their own produce. Important for supporting healthier lifestyles, community involvement and cohesion.	Belfast City Council owns and manages the allotments referenced in this strategy. However, there may be others run by local community groups or private ownership.
	Community gardens	Secure, free, communal areas providing opportunities for community gardening and empowering communities, enabling community cohesion, health and education. They are also important as a means of addressing wider food supply issues.	The land used for community gardens is owned by a variety of organisations including council, NI Housing Executive, local community groups or private ownership.
<b>Cemeteries</b>		Quiet areas for burial that also provide opportunities for wildlife conservation, cultural heritage and biodiversity.	Belfast City Council own and manage most cemeteries although some are under the control of their associated church.

## Supply and distribution of open spaces

This section provides an analysis of different open space typologies across the city. It has been generated by compiling spatial data from a number of sources.

Analysis shows that over a quarter of the city's area, some 2,388.4ha, is open space. The table opposite summarises the supply of specific open space typologies across the city and Figure 3 shows how this is distributed.

Supply and distribution of open spaces - analysis at June 2018			
Type	Sub- type	Number of sites (co-located)	Area (ha)
Parks*	Country park	6	495.2
	City park	2	44.9
	District park	9	132.9
	Local park	49	273.6
<b>Total parks</b>		<b>66</b>	<b>946.6*</b>
Playing fields	Public	101 (78)	171.2
	Private	40	120.4
	School or university	33	151.6
<b>Total playing fields</b>		<b>174 (78)</b>	<b>443.2</b>
Play areas <sup>§</sup>	Golf courses	11	442.6
	Other outdoor sports	36 (19)	25.0
	LEAPs	48 (16)	14.9
	NEAPs	55 (36)	33.4
	MUGAs	79 (29)	9.9
<b>Total play areas</b>		<b>182 (81)</b>	<b>58.2</b>
Amenity space	Other play facilities <sup>£</sup>	2 (2)	1.0
	Amenity space	1,460	293.7
Civic space	Civic space	13	17.7
Growing spaces	Allotments	8 (4)	6.0
	Community gardens	30 (12) <sup>%</sup>	1.8
<b>Growing spaces total</b>		<b>38 (22)</b>	<b>7.8</b>
Cemeteries		11	155.8
<b>Total</b>		<b>1970 (196)</b>	<b>2388.4</b>

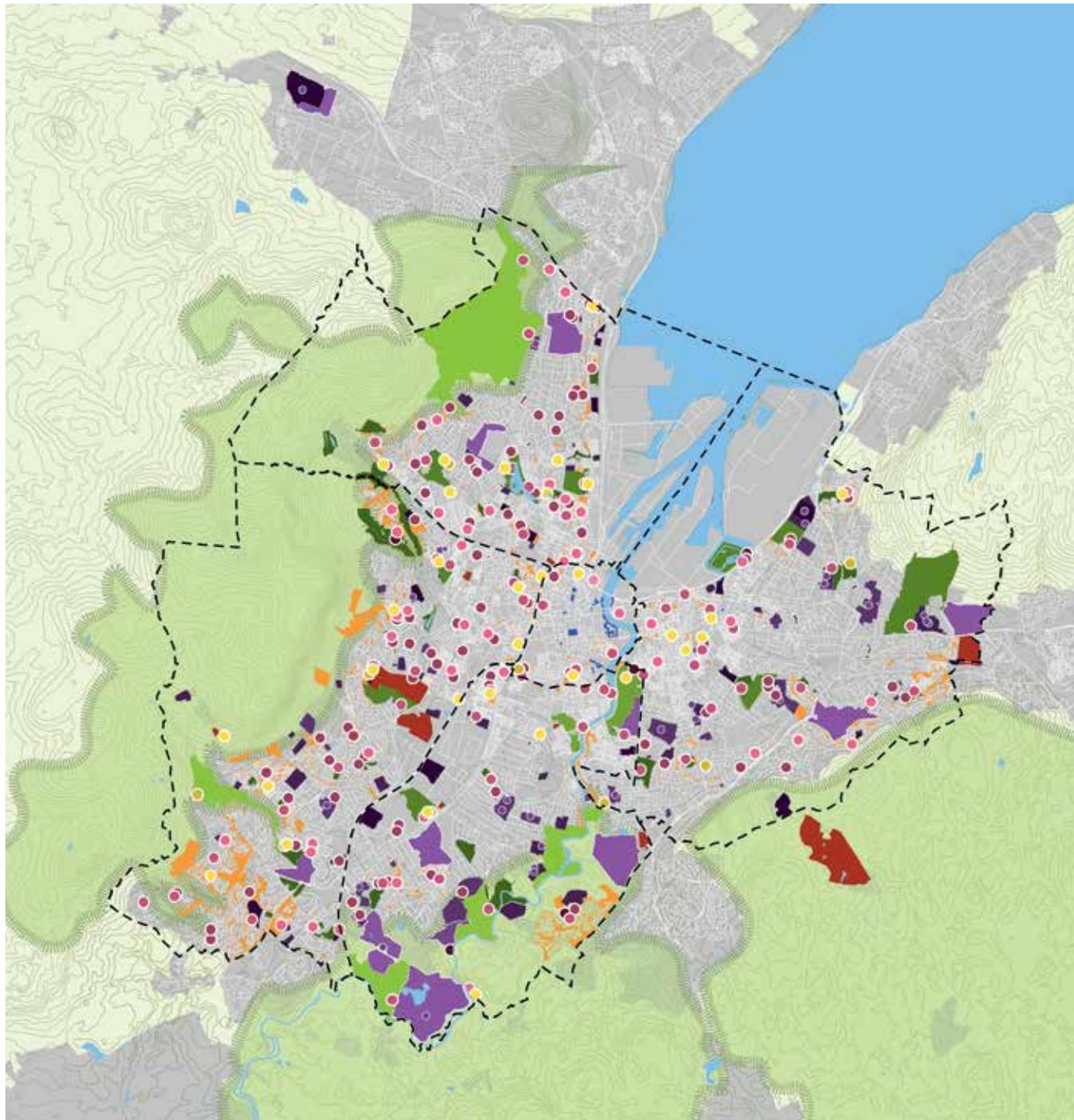
Table 2. Supply and Distribution of Open Spaces (analysis at June 2018)

\*There are 78 playing field sites totalling 61.6ha and 81 play areas (LEAPs, NEAPs and MUGAs) co-located within parks. As a result, their size has been subtracted from the total parks area. An average area for each has been applied to the relevant typology.

§ There are 98 LEAP/NEAP sites owned by Belfast City Council, two by other public bodies and three that are on private ground.

£ Includes a skate park and BMX track

% Note that area data is not available for all community gardens.



- Key**
- Parks: Local, District, City and Country
  - Playing fields: Public, private, school/universities, other sports and golf
  - ● Play areas: LEAP, NEAP, MUGA, BMX track and Skatepark
  - Amenity open space
  - Civic space
  - Growing spaces: Community gardens and allotments
  - Cemeteries
  - BCC Area Working Groups with city centre boundary
  - Urban area
  - Waterways and waterbodies
  - Surrounding Significant Open Space (such as The Belfast Hills, Castlereagh Hills and Lagan Valley Regional Park)

*Note that play areas and growing spaces have been shown as points as there is no spatial data for play areas within parks or growing spaces as they are too small to show.*

*Also note that Belfast City Council also owns public City of Belfast Playing fields, City of Belfast Golf Course and Roselawn Cemetery, all outside the Belfast City Council district boundary.*

Figure 3. Belfast Open Spaces Network (analysis at June 2018)

## Benchmarking provision

The SPSS sets out a policy aspiration to meet the National Playing Field Association (NPFA) ‘six-acre standard’, a **target of 2.4hectares per 1,000 people** comprising of 1.6hectares suitable for outdoor sports and recreation and 0.8hectares for children’s play space. In 2015 the NPFA was replaced by the Fields in Trust (FiT) standard. We are committed to protecting our existing open space and we will use benchmarking as a reference to help inform future investment and improvements in our open space network.

### NPFA

Belfast has 946.6hectares of parks (including country parks) and 171.2hectares of publicly accessible playing fields that are suitable for outdoor sport and recreation, as well as 58.2hectares of equipped children’s play areas. For Belfast’s population of 339,600 this is equivalent to 3.5hectares per 1,000 people, therefore exceeding the six-acre standard. However, we also acknowledge that not all open spaces are accessible, which will be referred to in the next section. Without the country parks, the figure for Belfast is 2hectares per 1,000 people. However, we also acknowledge that not all open spaces are accessible, which will be referred to in the next section.

\* Excludes country parks

§ Play areas only include equipped LEAPs, NEAPs. The FiT standard also includes Local areas for play (LAPs).

£ Estimated size based on average size of standalone MUGA of 0.12ha. Includes skatepark but not BMX tracks.

12 - <http://www.fieldsintrust.org>

### Fields in Trust

In 2015, FiT<sup>12</sup> replaced the ‘six-acre standard’ with more comprehensive metrics for open space typologies. Where appropriate a comparison has been outlined on Table 3. The FiT standard also sets out provision for 1.8hectares per 1,000 people of natural and semi-natural spaces which has not been accessed as part of this strategy.

It is clear from Table 3 that Belfast’s park provision is more than the FiT benchmark. Publicly accessible playing field provision is lower than the benchmark, however when considering all playing pitches in Belfast there are a total of 1.3hectares per 1,000 people.

Play area provision, and other outdoor provision, particularly MUGAs, is lower than the FiT benchmark. However, it is important to note that this typology is not directly comparable, as the FiT benchmark also includes local areas for play (LAPs), which are accounted for in the amenity green space typology in Belfast. It is also important to highlight that although not equipped, we provide significant areas of open space for informal play within our parks.

Belfast’s amenity space provision is also higher than the FiT benchmark and is likely to be higher as it has not been possible to map all amenity space in this assessment.

Belfast’s open space provision against the FiT benchmark			
Typology	FiT standard per 1,000 people (ha)	Belfast total (ha)	Belfast (ha) per 1,000 people
Parks*	0.8ha	451.4ha	1.3ha
Parks including country parks	0.8ha	946.6ha	2.8ha
		171.2ha	0.5ha (Publicly accessible)
All playing fields	1.2ha	272ha	0.8ha (Private/ School/ Universities)
		443.2ha (total)	1.3ha (total)
Play areas <sup>§</sup>	0.25ha	48.3ha	0.14ha
Other outdoor provision <sup>£</sup>	0.3ha	10.9ha	0.03ha
Amenity green space	0.6ha	293.7ha	0.9ha

Table 3. Belfast’s Open Space provision against the FiT benchmark



## ***Park and play area accessibility***

As well as providing parks and open spaces, it is important that they are accessible.

We have used Transport NI's 'Pathways Data' to map the accessibility of our open spaces. Catchments were identified by measuring walking distances from the entrances of open spaces to the existing path network. Catchment areas take account of obstructions, such as roads, railway lines and rivers – increasing the distance and time taken to access an open space. Where peace lines sit within a catchment, they are considered obstructions that reduce accessibility.

Recommended catchments for park and play area typologies are listed below:

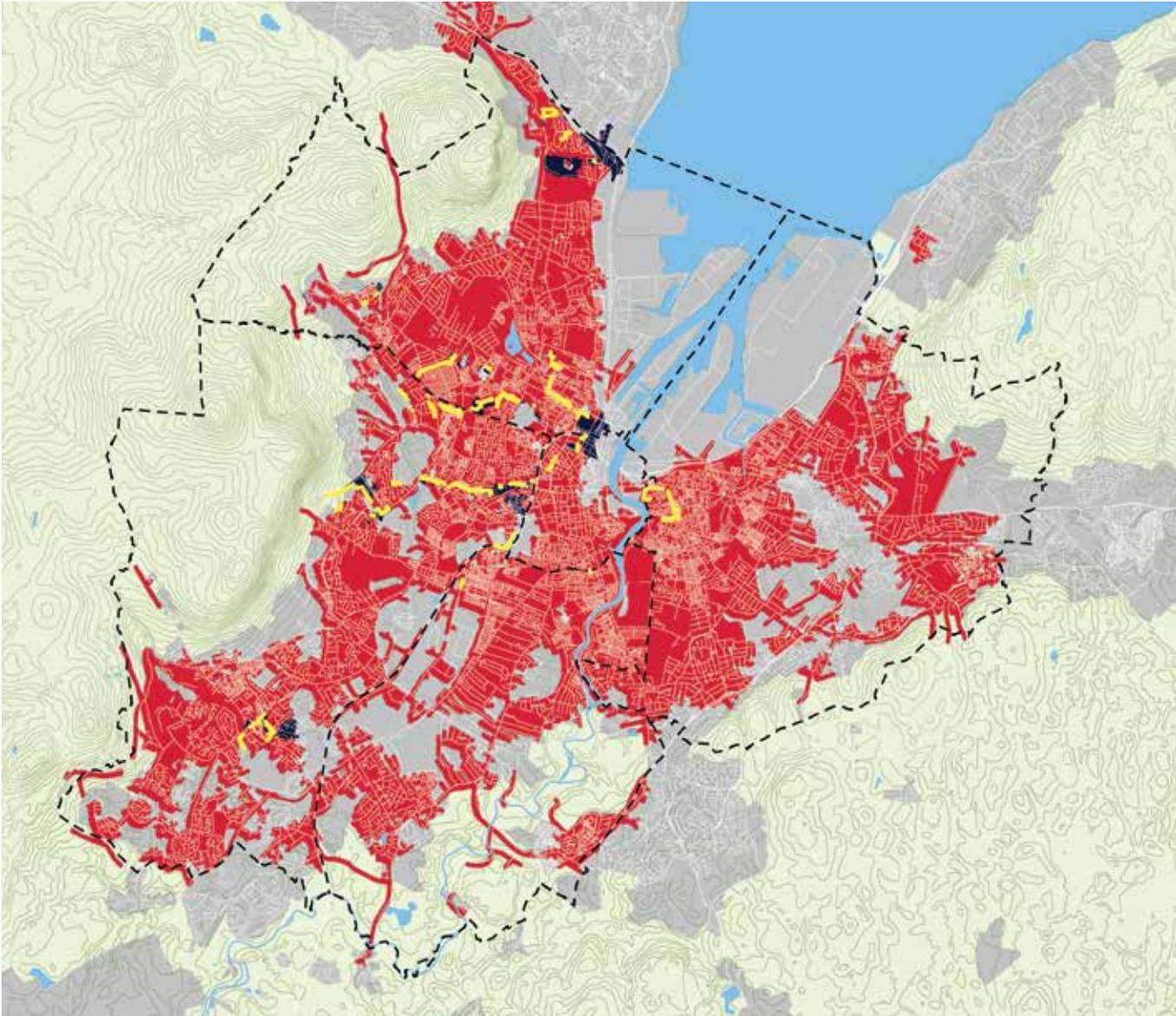
- Parks
  - Local parks – 400m (around 5min walk)
  - District (city and country parks) – 1,200m (around 15min walk)
- Play areas
  - LEAP – 400m (around 5min walk)
  - NEAP – 1,000m (around 13min walk)
  - MUGA – 700m (around 9min walk)

### **Park and play area accessibility – combined catchments**

Figure 4 shows the catchment of parks and play areas and how this could increase if the peace lines were removed. It highlights that 71.3% of the population (242,086 people) live within recommended walking distances for either a park or play area. If peace lines were removed 4,253 more residents would have access to a park or play area, increasing access to 72.5% of the population (246,338 people). **At a city level, park and play area accessibility is indicative and can be explored in detail at a neighbourhood level to help address increasing needs in the future.**



Source: Belfast City Council



- Key
- Park and play area accessibility (with Peace Lines)
  - Park and play area accessibility (Peace Lines removed)
  - Peace Lines
  - Urban extent
  - - - BCC Area Working Groups with city centre boundary
  - Waterways and waterbodies
  - Surrounding areas

Figure 4. Park and play area accessibility – combined catchments

## **Quality of our open spaces**

The quality of our open spaces is important for ensuring they are welcoming, safe and well-used. We are proud that many of our parks and open spaces have gained the Green Flag award – an internationally recognised standard of quality. In our Residents' Survey (2014), 73.3% of respondents felt generally satisfied with our parks and 49.3% of respondents also said they used a council park for physical activity at least once a week, and 10% daily. Also, 81.9% of respondents agreed that their local area had good quality parks and green spaces. We regularly assess the quality of our open spaces by carrying out audits and inspections.

### **Open space quality audits and inspections**

The quality and horticultural standards of our open spaces is generally high across the city. We regularly inspect the quality of our parks, buildings, trees, play areas, playing fields, memorials and burial grounds. We inspect our open spaces for invasive alien species (IAS), recording, monitoring, and putting control mechanisms in place.

All playgrounds, MUGAs and outdoor gyms are inspected independently each year. All path networks in our open spaces are also inspected monthly by our officers.

### **Operational management feedback**

We regularly engage with our operational staff to gather important qualitative information. A number of issues were identified impacting our open space network, including:

#### *Financing*

Reduced capital revenue budgets and resources continue to be a challenge so we need to introduce more efficient management practices and better maximise the use of our existing open space network. Identifying sources of income and external funding is critical for long-term sustainability.

#### *Safety*

Anti-social behaviour (ASB) remains an issue in our open spaces. Operational managers confirmed that we need to continue to work closely with local communities to reduce ASB and understand how young people use our spaces and holding more community events and activities. Where possible, Secured by Design principles are applied to the regeneration plans for our open spaces.

#### *Irresponsible dog ownership*

Our open spaces provide an important resource for dog owners. In some of our spaces, irresponsible dog ownership remains an issue and we will continue to improve awareness of responsible dog ownership and enforce by-laws and control orders within our open spaces.

#### *Accessibility*

Access to, within and between our open spaces is paramount; we will make sure they are inclusive to all, including people with a range of mobility, physical, sensory and cognitive impairments.

#### *Sustainable drainage*

As a result of the adverse weather conditions, drainage and severe flooding remains an issue within some of our spaces for example Victoria Park. We need to increase drainage capacity and identify land which can be dedicated to slowing down the force of water, which will not only increase the usage of spaces, but will also reduce the risk of flooding.

#### *Invasive alien species (IAS)*

The increasing threat of IAS remains a challenge, which impacts local, native biodiversity and has associated health and safety and cost implications. We will continue to inspect, monitor and control this going forward.

In summary operational managers recognise the need for open spaces, particularly parks to be flexible in the future so that they are relevant to trends, maintenance budgets and usage pressures.

## Demand for new open space

This strategy will support the shared growth strategy of the Belfast Agenda and the LDP. Belfast is aiming to deliver significant inclusive growth and opportunity by 2035, this means our city is home to an additional 66,000 people; supporting 46,000 additional jobs and creating 31,600 additional homes. City growth will place additional pressure on the city's existing open space network.

This strategy and the policy approach adopted within the LDP will ensure that existing open space is protected and future provision meets the needs of the growing population. Where there are limited opportunities to create new open space within the city, we will work with developers through Section 76 of the Town Planning (Northern Ireland) 2011 Act, to find creative ways to improve provision, connectivity and accessibility to open spaces.

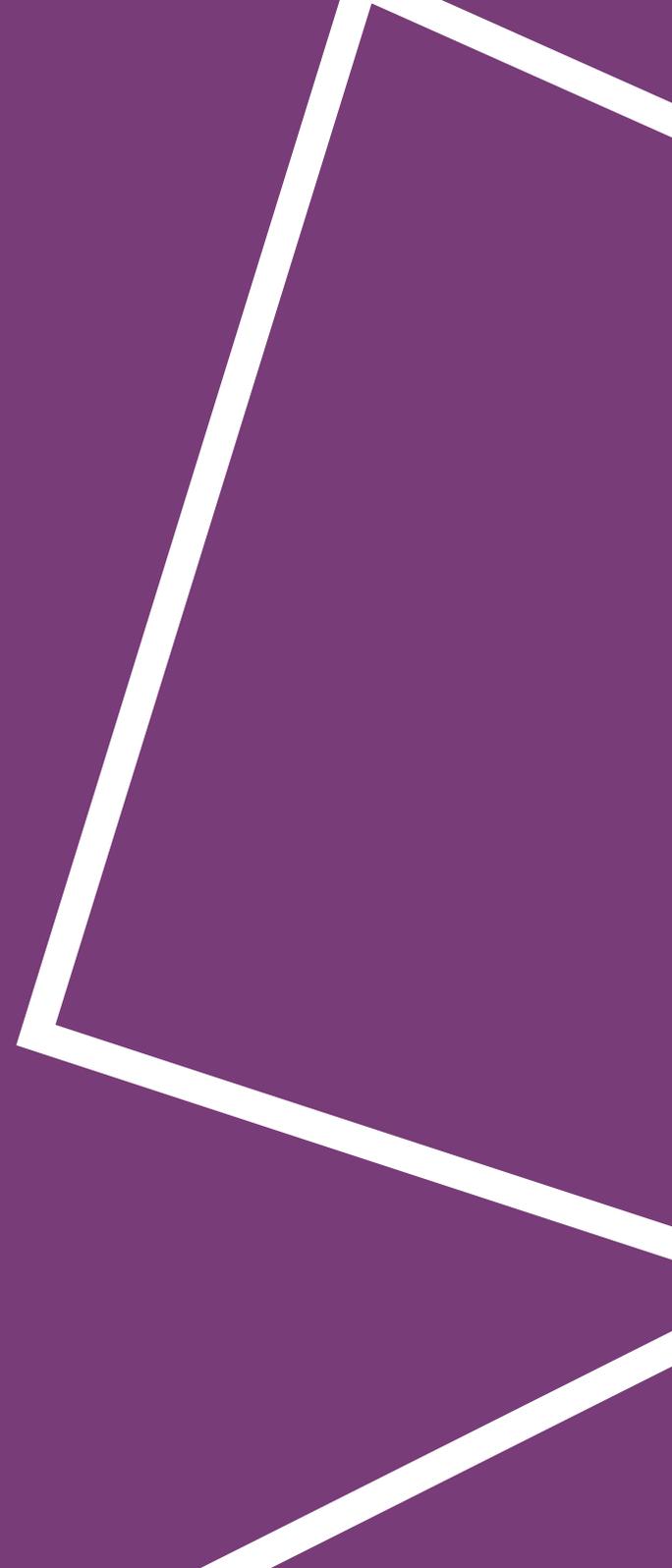


Figure 5. Belfast Agenda and LDP Growth Strategy

## Summary points

- Belfast has a wide range of open space typologies, catering for a variety of different uses and functions.
- We will protect and improve existing open spaces and support new provision of open spaces to meet growing demand. New open space will help improve accessibility and connectivity.
- Around a quarter of our city's area (2,390ha) is dedicated to open space.
- Almost 71.3% of the population live within a catchment area for either a park or play area. Improving access through peace lines would increase this by 1.25%.
- We need to ensure that the quality of open space is maintained and improved where possible.
- There are significant areas of amenity space across the city. There may be opportunities to change functionality in line with local needs.
- There is limited green space in the city centre and we need to identify opportunities to increase provision in the future.
- The introduction of traffic-free routes will help improve accessibility and connectivity.
- Section 76 developer contributions will help mitigate the impact of new development on our existing open space network.

**By 2035...**



The background is a solid purple color. It features several white, thick, geometric lines that form abstract shapes, including triangles and polygons, scattered across the frame. The text is centered in the middle of the image.

**...Belfast will have a well-connected network of high-quality open spaces recognised for the value and benefits they provide to everyone who lives in, works in and visits our city.**

## Vision, strategic principles and opportunities

Well designed, managed and accessible open spaces provide a range of health, economic, social, environmental and cultural benefits. Although Belfast has an extensive open space network, we believe there is potential to ensure these benefits reach a much wider audience. If local people value their open spaces, there is a greater sense of ownership, higher levels of usage and participation and the potential to enhance social cohesion.

The vision, strategic principles and opportunities for Belfast's open spaces were developed in conjunction with our stakeholders:

**By 2035...**

**Belfast will have a well-connected network of high quality open spaces recognised for the value and benefits they provide to everyone who lives in, works in and visits our city.**

## Strategic principles

Seven strategic principles (SPs) have been agreed to support the protection, improvement, creation, accessibility and connectivity of our open space network. These principles provide the foundation and framework for achieving our vision. Belfast's open spaces will:

### SP1. Provide welcoming shared spaces

Our high-quality open spaces are inviting and safe for everyone to use. There will be enough space to meet the needs of our growing city and our open spaces will be used to encourage community cohesion and social interaction.

### SP2. Improve connectivity

Well-connected and accessible open spaces will form a green network to support safe and sustainable movement across the city.

### SP3. Improve health and wellbeing

Offering a wide range of facilities for formal sports and informal recreation, our open spaces will be the preferred option for exercise, relaxation and enjoyment.

### SP4. Support place-making and enhance the built environment

Our open spaces will positively contribute to the distinct setting and character of our neighbourhoods and the built environment, helping to retain and attract investment.

### SP5. Increase resilience to climate change

Our open spaces will help us to minimise the impacts of climate change, including more severe rainfall events.

### SP6. Protect and enhance the natural environment

By protecting and managing a wide range of habitats, our open spaces will strengthen biodiversity and benefit from the ecosystem services a healthy natural environment provides.

### SP7. Be celebrated and support learning

Ensuring that events, activities and educational opportunities within our open spaces are well promoted, well used and valued by future generations.

## SP1: Provide welcoming shared spaces

Our open spaces are for everyone to use and enjoy, shared by the whole community. They need to be inclusive, safe and welcoming to both residents and visitors alike. To do this, open spaces need to be accessible, valued, frequently used and well maintained. The focus of SP1 is to ensure that spaces are welcoming to all and meet local needs. The planned growth of the city will increase demand for new open space and put pressure on our existing network.

### Opportunities to provide welcoming shared spaces

**Protect and improve existing open spaces** - This strategy supports the policy approach of the Strategic Planning Policy Statement (SPPS) and the Local Development Plan (LDP) to protect and improve open spaces and their biodiversity value. We also realise that investing in the creation of good quality parks and open spaces which are well designed, managed and maintained is vital. Achieving national standards and awards provide useful benchmarks and help improve the standard of our open spaces. This needs to be balanced against the challenges of decreasing capital budgets and we need to look creatively at how we can secure other sources of investment funding.

**Target areas of inaccessibility** - We have a substantial open space network; however, the accessibility hotspots highlighted in Figure 6 are areas with the least provision of publicly accessible parks and play areas<sup>13</sup>. **At a city level these zones are indicative and need to be interpreted in detail at a neighbourhood level.** Where possible we will aim to provide new spaces or improve access to existing open space in and around these hotspots.

**Leverage development and growth** - Accommodating growth will require significant new development and regeneration to the city. The majority of the housing demand is likely to be concentrated in the city centre area, with the remainder mainly on small and infill sites. There are also strategic areas of regeneration across the city including North Foreshore, Titanic Quarter and Belfast Waterside. All new development will be expected to either provide new open space or help connect and improve the existing open spaces network through Section 76 framework of the Town Planning (NI) Act 2011. Where development places increased pressure on existing assets such as open spaces, Section 76 allows us to agree developer contributions for works to help mitigate adverse impacts.

**Create temporary or meanwhile uses** - We want spaces to be attractive and thriving areas of activity. We will work in partnership to encourage the introduction of 'meanwhile uses' or pocket parks where appropriate across the city.

**Build stronger communities** - Our parks and open spaces provide conciliatory and socially inclusive opportunities for people and groups to interact and meet new people. We will continue to build relationships across communities to increase confidence using and developing shared spaces and services. Community pride in spaces helps create cohesion in local neighbourhoods.

**Improve safety and security** - Access to open spaces is not just restricted by physical barriers and local concerns should also be considered. Our open spaces should be safe for everyone to use. We will apply Secured by Design principles to the management and development of our open spaces. We will also explore opportunities to reduce ASB using new technologies, to promote safety and security. The introduction of our warden service has increased the amount of staff present in our parks as an effective way to improve safety and security and provide a valuable point of contact for users.

13 - Zones of under provision may occur because they:

- Contain accessible open space not classified as a park or a play area (for example Milltown Cemetery)
- Are close to open space not accessible to the public (for example golf courses and school or private pitches);
- Have physical barriers making open space accessibility difficult; or
- Are areas of industrial, commercial and non-residential land.

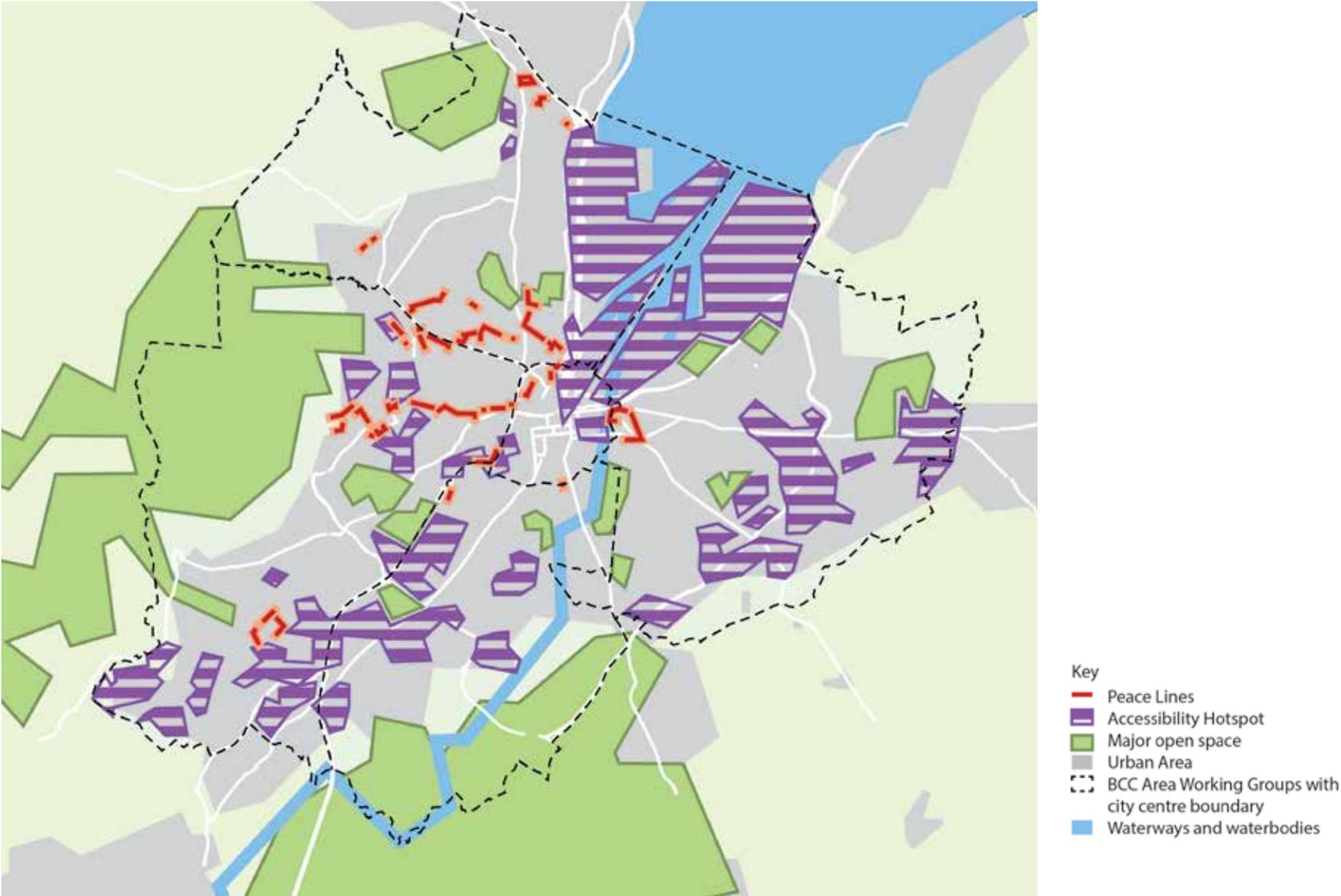


Figure 6. Opportunities for providing welcoming shared spaces

## SP2: Improve connectivity

With limited opportunities to create new open space, improving access and connections to the existing green network will enable more people to enjoy the benefits they provide. We have already started to do this by providing traffic-free routes across the network (for example the Connswater Community Greenway).

As well as providing better opportunities for recreation, improved connectivity also helps promote active travel by encouraging more people to walk and cycle to their destinations through our parks and open spaces. This helps reduce vehicular traffic congestion, air pollution and climate change inducing emissions. Open spaces and the connections between them form a city-wide network. This network also extends out beyond the city boundary into the countryside. Well designed, planned and managed green networks have multiple benefits for people, the economy and wildlife.

### Opportunities for improving connectivity

**Better connected open spaces** - There are a number of zones within Belfast that do not fall within park and play area catchments. It may not always be possible to create open spaces in these areas due to limitations of existing land uses for example commercial, industrial and non-residential. Therefore, it will be important to improve connectivity to nearby open spaces. This could include reducing barriers to access for example improving crossing points at main roads or creating new access points to existing open spaces.

<sup>14</sup> - Northern Ireland Executive (2013) Together: Building a United Community Strategy

**Reduce interface barriers** - Through the Together: Building a United Community<sup>14</sup> strategy, the Northern Ireland Executive has set a policy goal for removing interface barriers by 2023, recognising the potential to improve community relations and continuing the journey towards a more united and shared society. We will continue to work in partnership to support the removal of peace lines, to release land for open space development and improve access to existing parks and play areas, therefore creating more connected neighbourhoods.

**Enhance and extend the greenway network** - We are committed to creating more greenways that segregate walking and cycling routes from vehicular traffic. We will work with partners on these linear routes to link the existing open spaces network, making use of under-utilised space, improving accessibility and providing better access to the countryside. Figure 7 shows Belfast's existing greenways network and some proposed new routes. These routes have been taken from the Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan (BMAP) and the Northern Ireland Strategic Plan for Greenways (2016). Where it is not possible to create dedicated cycling and walking routes in established built up areas, we will seek to enhance the existing pathway network. Focusing on quieter roads, we will work in partnership to provide partially segregated routes that have a distinct character for example consistent street furniture and tree planting.

**Improve connections to the countryside** - Belfast is surrounded by diverse countryside with some internationally recognised for their landscape value for example Divis and the Black Mountain. Most visitors drive to these areas, as facilities are limited. Improving facilities and the accessibility to the countryside enables more people to make use of these valuable resources and tourist attractions.

**Improve usage** - Although there are around 440 hectares of playing pitches in Belfast, only 173 hectares are publicly accessible. Access to the remaining 267 hectares is restricted in some way, for example they may be restricted because they are part of school or university facilities. In addition to council capital investment in playing pitches, we will continue to work with partners to maximise community access to these spaces.

Belfast has a significant area of amenity space. These green parcels of land are designed to improve the attractiveness of housing development and infrastructure. These spaces are usually low in biodiversity value and are costly to maintain. We will continue to work with our partners to identify ways of managing these spaces more efficiently for example wildflower meadow planting or the development of natural play areas.

**Improve wildlife connections** - As well as providing good connectivity for people to move around, our wildlife also needs safe routes to move across the city. Careful design and management are required when creating new greenways and enhancing the community path network. SP 6 sets out more opportunities for our open space network to support biodiversity.

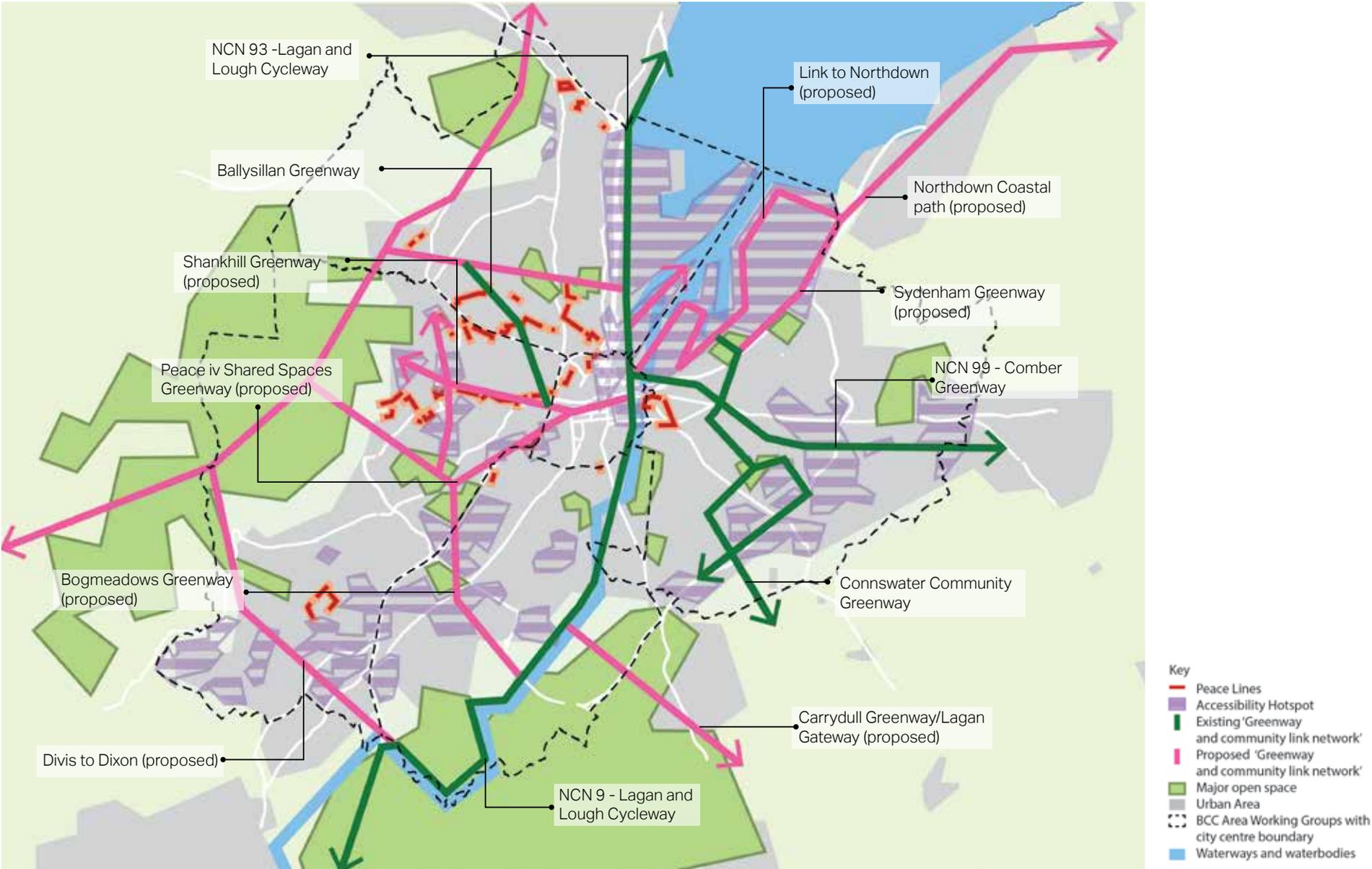


Figure 7. Opportunities for improving connectivity

## **SP3: Improve health and wellbeing**

Our open spaces provide inspiring and pleasant places for active and passive recreation, improving physical health and mental wellbeing for today's sedentary lifestyles. The results of our City Residents' Survey revealed that approximately 50% of respondents used a council park for physical activity. Getting more people to use our open spaces, more often, encourages physical activity and improves health and wellbeing.

Although there has been progress over recent years, significant health inequalities persist in Belfast. Figure 8 shows the health deprivation and disability domain of the Northern Ireland multiple deprivation measures 2017 (NIMDM) for each 'super output area' (SOA) (approximately 2,000 residents). The measures show that many of the worst performing areas are in the west, north and the centre of Belfast (darker colour depicts worse performing areas).

### **Opportunities for improving health and wellbeing**

**Target areas of health deprivation** – There is a correlation between the level of recreational open space (parks and play areas) and health deprivation. Figure 9 highlights where the areas of highest health deprivation (orange) correlate with areas of the least accessibility to parks and play areas to identify hotspots (red). These red hotspots highlight areas that would benefit from improved access to open space and prioritised health programming in existing spaces. **At a city level these zones are indicative and need to be interpreted in detail at a neighbourhood level.**

**Provide and invest in outdoor sports facilities** – We are the biggest provider of sports pitches in Belfast with around 130 pitches across 35 locations. These facilities offer opportunities for a variety of sports for example football, Gaelic games, cricket, tennis and bowling. Our parks and open spaces also provide opportunities for informal recreation. We need to continually invest in these facilities to keep them fit for purpose. Our Physical Investment Programme is the primary source of funding for improving these facilities. With the challenge of decreasing levels of capital investment going forward, we will continue to maximise both the use of the existing open space network and funding from other sources.

**Promote our open spaces and programmes** – Our open spaces and the activities organised within our open spaces (for example Parkrun) help improve health and wellbeing. We will continue to promote our open spaces as places to walk, to play, to meet friends, to sit and relax, to exercise the dog, to appreciate trees, shrubs, flowers, nature and fresh air.

**Encourage partnerships** – We will continue to work with the health sector and other partners to create active spaces and promote activities for 'at-risk' groups in our parks and open spaces. The Belfast Strategic Partnership (BSP) provides a collaborative approach to addressing life inequalities in Belfast; their 'Get Active Belfast' framework aims to encourage participation in physical activity outdoors.

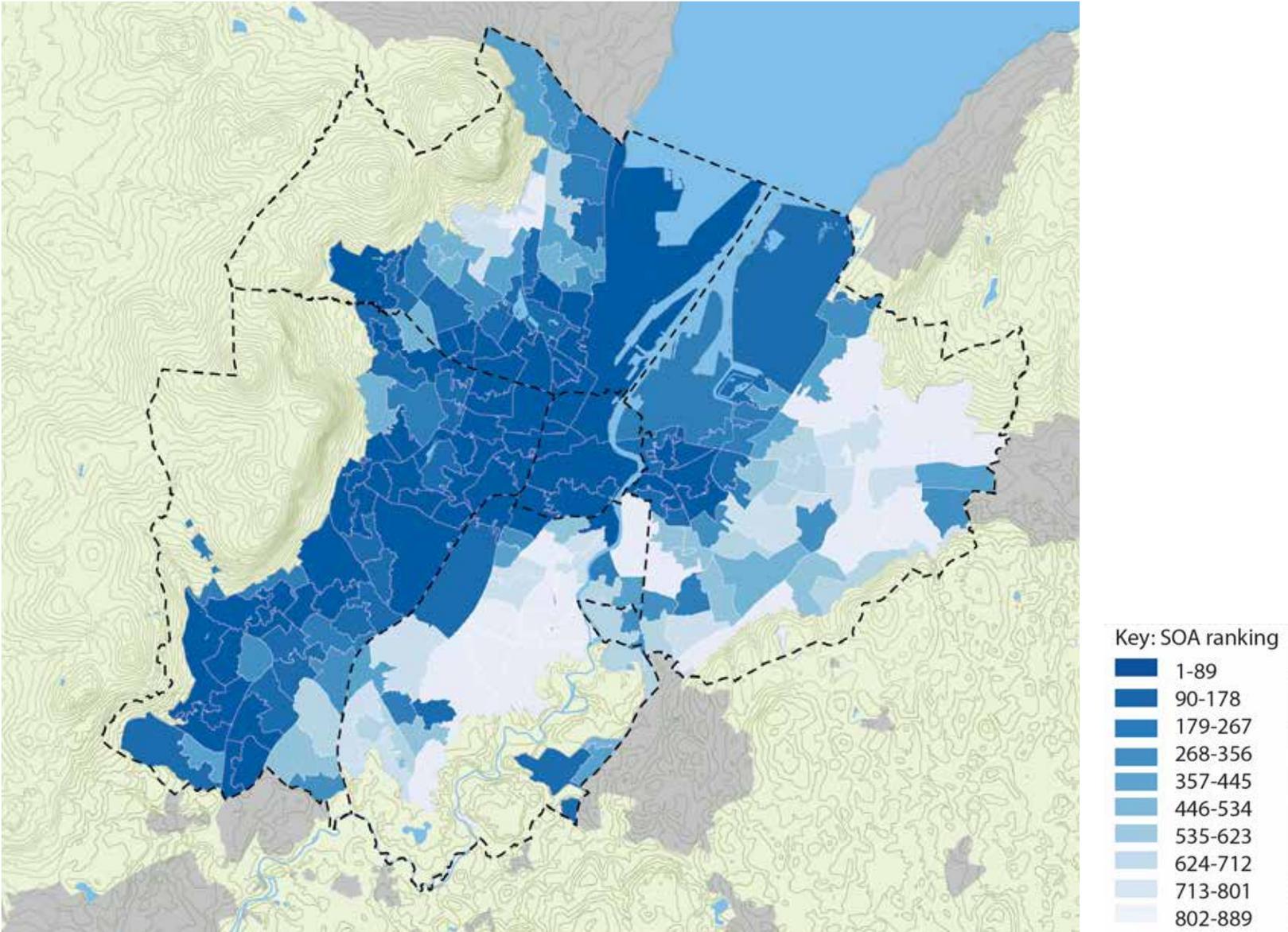


Figure 8. Health deprivation and disability domain (NIMDM 2017)

**Growing in our communities** – Our allotments and community gardens offer the potential for communities to grow food locally, exercise outdoors and socialise with others. We will continue to deliver our Growing Communities Strategy which aims to provide everyone in Belfast with the opportunity for improved health and wellbeing through involvement in growing activities within their local neighbourhood.

**Reduce air pollution** – With high concentrations of vehicles and industrial processes, air quality deteriorates in urban areas. In Belfast we have identified four areas where air quality fails to meet EU standards (purple in Figure 9). Within the air quality management areas, we will explore ways to improve air quality for example using open spaces and vegetation to help absorb pollutants.

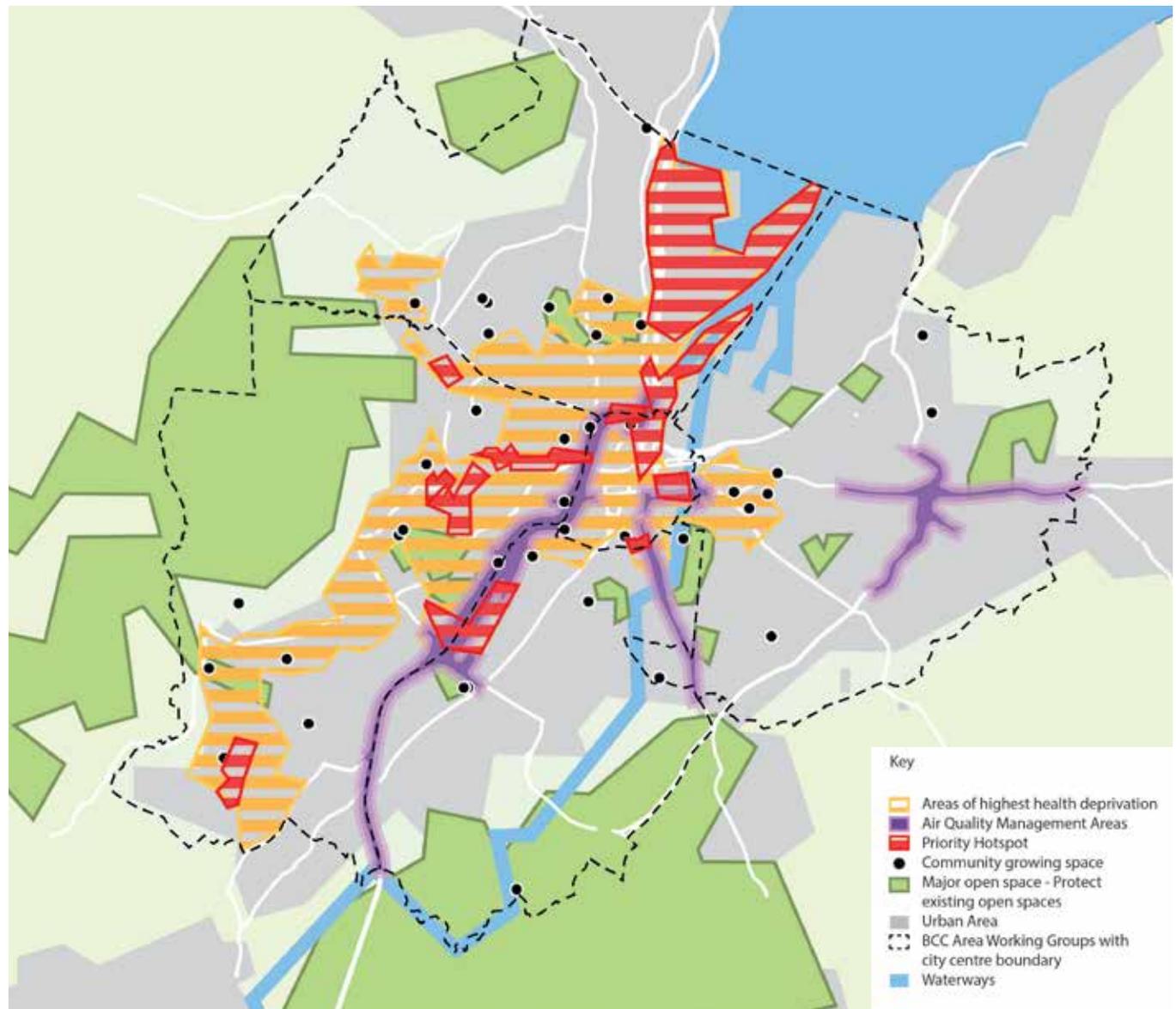


Figure 9. Opportunities for improving health and wellbeing



## ***SP4: Support place-making and enhance the built environment***

Our open spaces have an important place-making role. As well as being destinations in their own right, they complement the built environment and provide an important setting for our heritage assets such as Belfast City Hall, Belfast Castle and Malone House. The quality of these spaces can have a direct impact on how our built environment is perceived, which in turn affects our ability to attract investment. Similarly, the provision of high-quality open space is important for attracting tourists and visitors.

At a local level open spaces help to define the character of our neighbourhoods. The quality of amenity space can impact the vibrancy of the local economy and people's perceptions of place. Some of our open spaces also include buildings, which have heritage value.

### **Opportunities to support place-making and enhance the built environment**

**Greening the city centre** - The Belfast City centre Regeneration and Investment Strategy (2015) recognises that the city centre has limited public green space. It highlights the potential for new green space at Cathedral Gardens. Regenerating the river corridor through the city centre and extending to the Titanic Quarter would enable active travel and animation along the river. There are also opportunities to create a tree-lined urban boulevard, along Great Victoria Street and Dunbar Link. Figure 10 illustrates some of these potential opportunities.

Three Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) have been set up across central Belfast to enhance the environment in the city centre with the aspiration to attract more potential customers. With the power to raise revenue from rates to invest in environmental improvements, they will be important partners in helping to develop a world class city centre.

**Improve the image of derelict or vacant spaces** – We will seek opportunities to bring derelict buildings in our open spaces back into use for community activities and to provide a better range of facilities. The city has derelict land and a number of vacant plots awaiting development. These spaces can detract from the sense of place and can appear run-down. We will support the greening of these spaces where possible and will work with developers and

partners to create uses for these sites such as pop-up gardens or pocket parks. These uses can become important destinations and help local businesses develop and thrive while wider regeneration occurs.

**Activate and animate open spaces** – Although there are times when we want to create quiet spaces for reflection, relaxation and biodiversity, spaces with lots of activity tend to draw people in. This can help make spaces feel more sociable, safe and offer potential revenue streams. For example events in our civic spaces can help attract visitors who will also use the local shops; having appropriate facilities and supporting concessions such as cafes and mobile vendors in our parks can help them become centres for community activities.

**Value our built heritage** – Belfast has a range of local landmarks and open spaces that contain a range of important architectural and historic features that help tell the story about the rich heritage of the city. We will continue to assess the long-term sustainability of buildings for restoration and continue to source funding for open space heritage schemes.

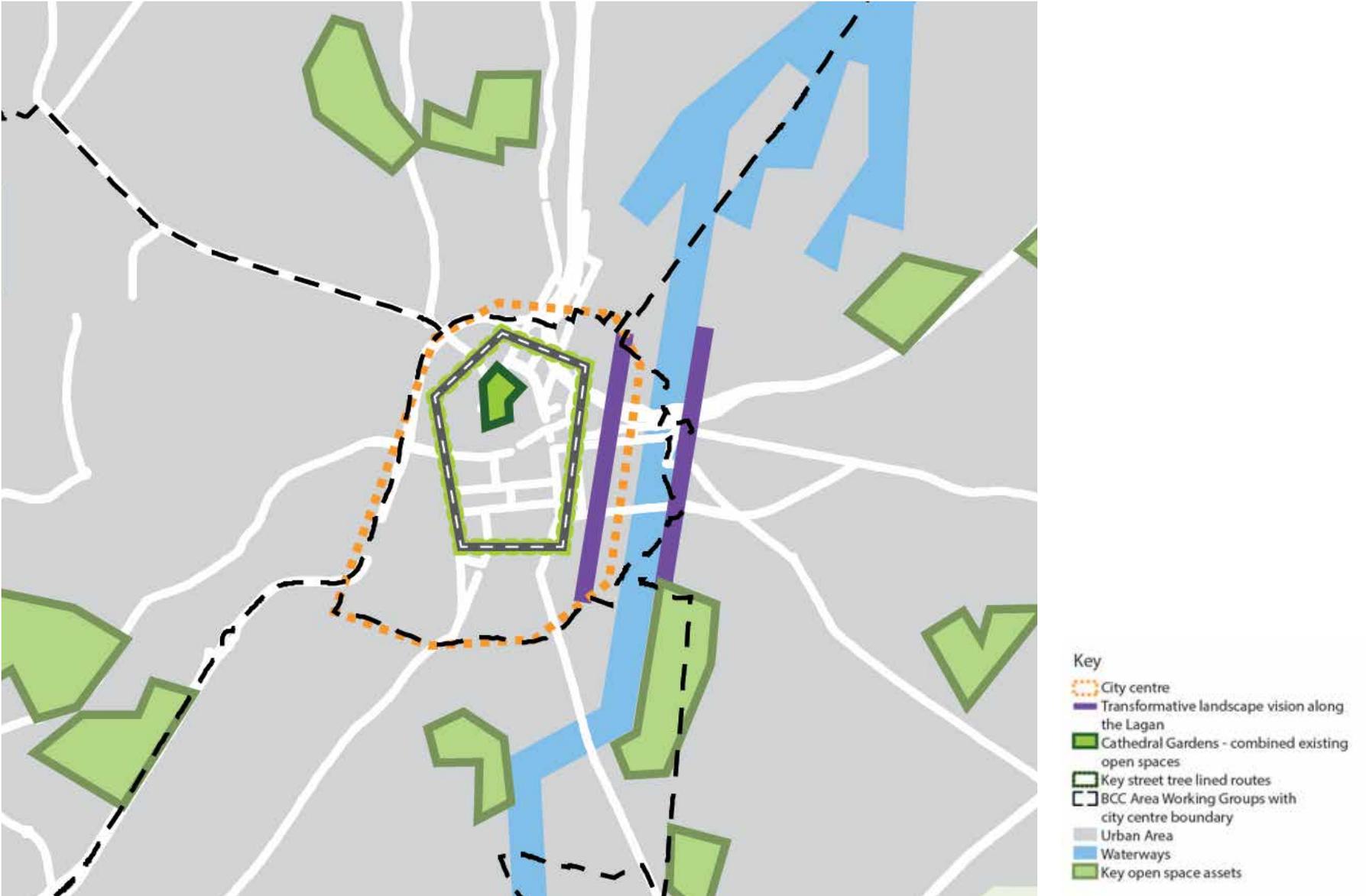


Figure 10. Opportunities to support place-making in Belfast City Centre

## ***SP5: Increase resilience to climate change***

Climate change is caused, in part, by burning fossil fuels such as petrol and diesel. Open spaces form part of a green network that encourages sustainable forms of movement, helping to reduce emissions and mitigate impacts that affect climate change. We will also have to adapt to a changing climate featuring more intense winter rainfall, drier summers and unpredictable severe weather. Our open spaces play an important role in helping increase our resilience to these changes.

### **Opportunities to increase resilience to climate change**

**Integrate drainage relief into urban design** – The most significant change to Belfast’s climate is predicted to be an increase in winter rainfall and heavier summer showers. As Belfast is situated on low lying, flood prone land and has a constrained surface water drainage network, the risk of flooding is likely to increase. Figure 11 highlights areas at risk from surface (rainwater) and fluvial (river) flooding and also shows areas of green space across the city.

Rainwater falling on hard urban surfaces runs off quickly and can overwhelm the existing drainage system. This results in either flooding or sewage overflows. Open space can be used to slow down surface water, reducing rates of discharge into our drainage system and reducing flooding risk. As part of the Living with Water Programme, NI Water is working to help reduce these risks and increase capacity in an aging surface water network by increasing space to deal with surges of surface water in existing open spaces. These areas would be allowed to flood safely during heavy rainfall events.

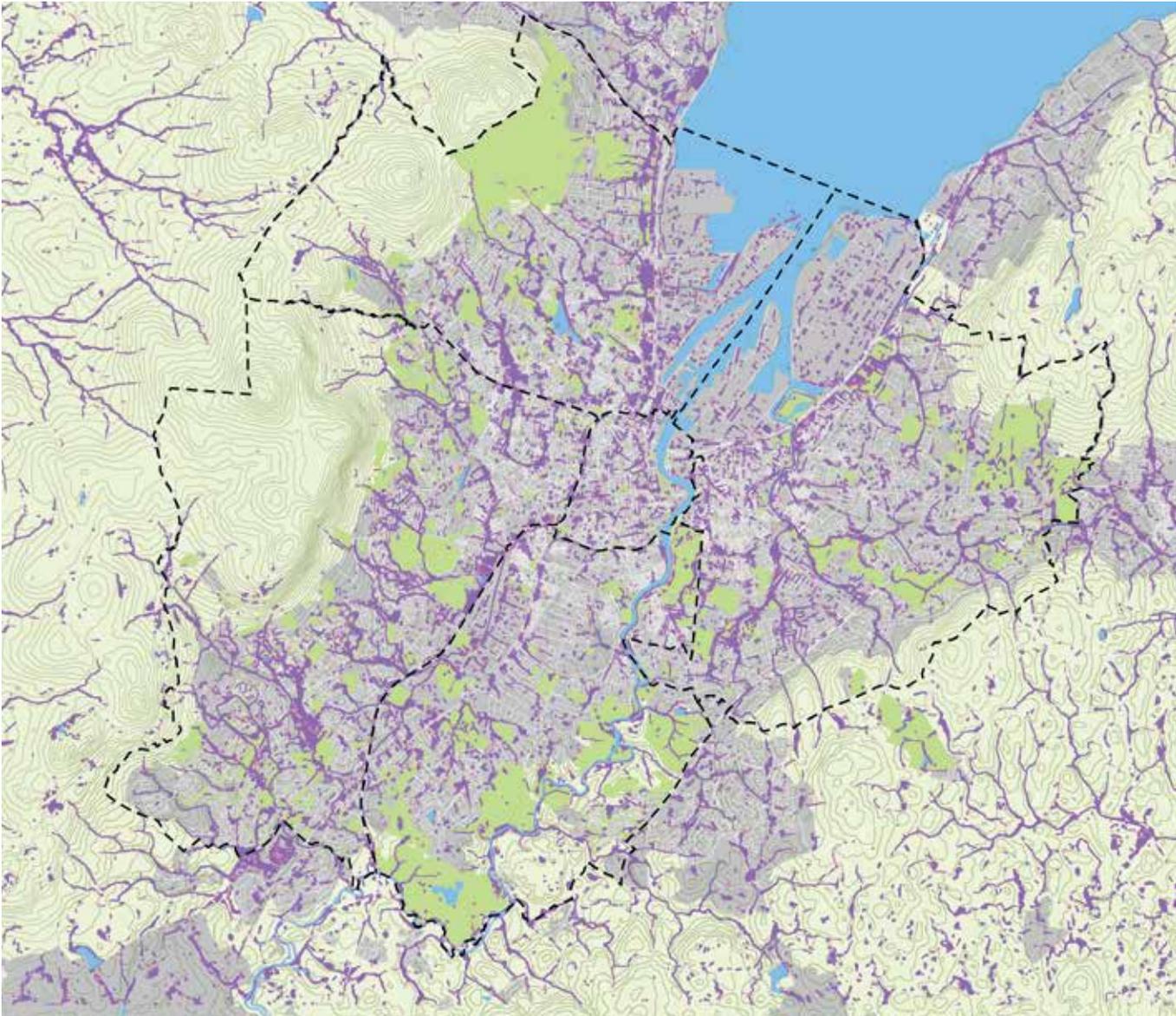
There are also opportunities to introduce sustainable drainage systems (SuDS) into the public realm. Smaller green spaces such as rain gardens and bio-retention tree pits help reduce the force of flood water and remove pollutants. They also help to improve local amenity, maximise water quality and support biodiversity.

**Provide storm water storage** – Climate change is likely to result in longer spells of drier weather. By collecting and storing rainwater, we have the opportunity to reuse this valuable resource in our open spaces. Through careful selection of plant species and the creation of wetland habitats within open spaces, we could create areas where water is retained longer, helping them to survive through drier summers.

**Change management practices and behaviours** – We need to consider climate change when managing our open spaces. Warmer winter temperatures will attract more visitors throughout the year and extend the peak season for usage. This will have an impact on lighting, management of paths and other facilities in our open spaces. The types and size of plants and warmer average temperatures are likely to increase numbers of alien and invasive species entering ecosystems. These species can threaten our native flora and fauna by aggressively taking over habitats. We need to be flexible in our management and control of parks and open spaces to make sure we adapt to these changing trends.

Using natural approaches to manage our open spaces (for example wild flower meadow planting) helps reduce fuel emissions associated with mowing. We must ensure that all elements of landscape management are carried out in an environmentally sustainable manner, for example reusing cuttings to create compost and reduce the use of fertilizers.

**Protect from extreme weather events** – More extreme weather events such as storms and tidal surges are likely to be a result of climate change. Our open spaces can provide protection from these events and tree planting and vegetation will help create shelterbelts.



- Key
- Surface water - 1 in 200yr storm
  - Surface water - 1 in 200yr storm + climate change
  - Open spaces
  - Urban area
  - BCC Area Working Groups with city centre boundary
  - Waterways and waterbodies
  - Surrounding area

Figure 11. Flood risk and open spaces in Belfast

## ***SP6: Protect and enhance the natural environment***

Biodiversity underpins critical ‘ecosystem services’ which bring us many benefits for example clean air, fresh drinking water and soil. Creating new habitats in Belfast helps support a broader range of species and allows them to move more freely across the city. We have a statutory duty to conserve biodiversity and our Local Biodiversity Action Plan (LBAP) identifies key priority habitats and species that need protection across the city. This principle focuses on how we use our open spaces to create and enhance habitats and support biodiversity.

### **Opportunities to enhance the natural environment**

#### **Protect and enhance areas of ecological importance**

There are some sites in Belfast which have been identified as being important for biodiversity. This includes parts of Belfast Lough, which have been protected both under EU (Special Protection Areas and Ramsar Convention on Wetlands) and NI Executive (Area of Special Scientific Interest (ASSI)) for their high-quality marine habitat and wintering bird populations. There are also 61 Sites of Local Nature Conservation Importance (SLNCI) and four Local Nature Reserves (LNR) in Belfast at Bog Meadows, Hazelwood, Ballyaghagan, and Lagan Meadows.

All areas of ecological importance will remain protected and we will continue to work to enhance them. Proposed development close to these sensitive sites should be undertaken with care, ensuring that it does not adversely affect habitats or resident species.

#### **Enhance habitats across our open space network –**

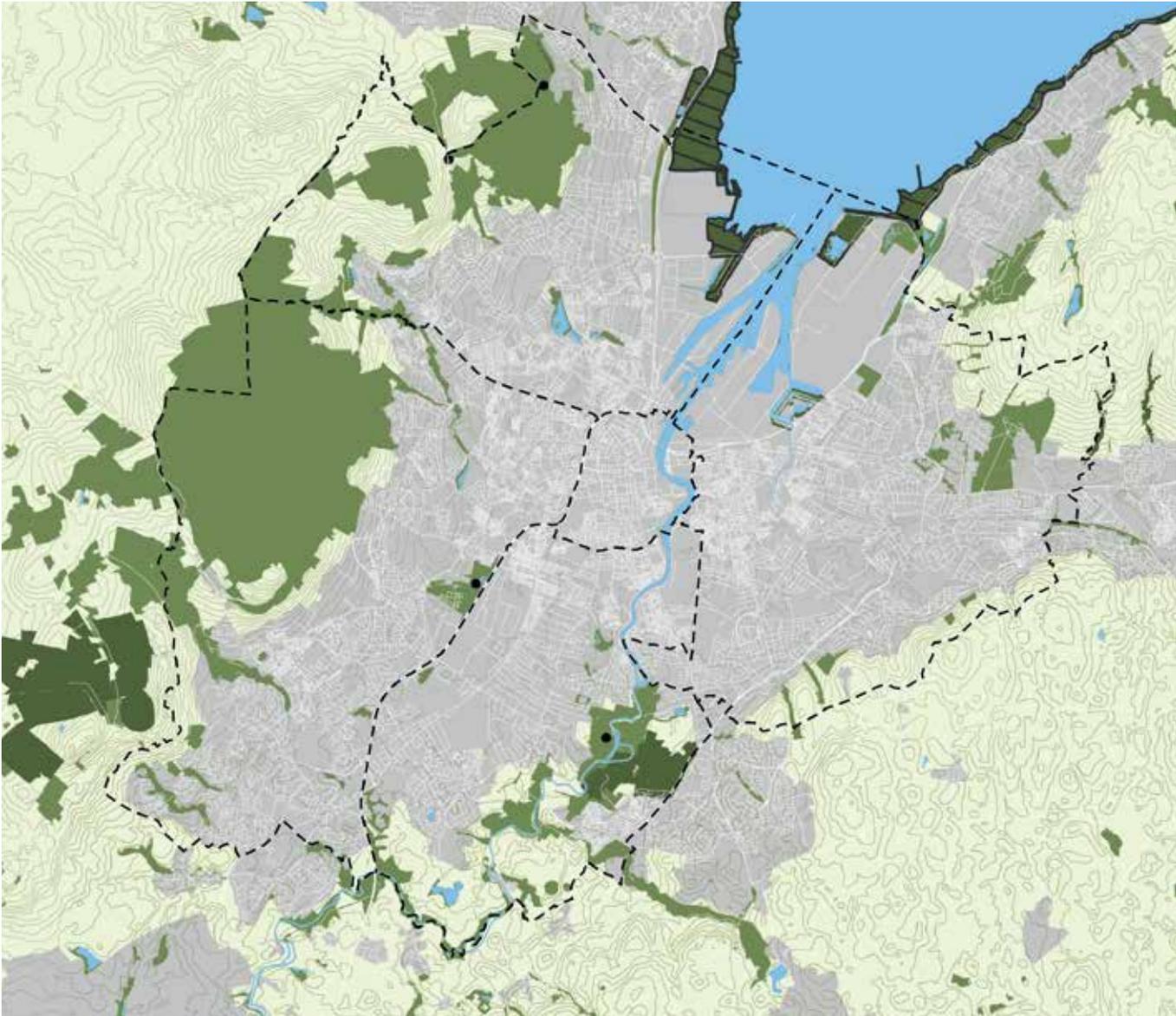
Our open spaces provide a number of habitats such as meadows, woodland, waterways, heathland and grassland. Although these habitats are in our open spaces, they do not have formal protection. We must ensure these areas are protected, managed and, where appropriate, extended. As some habitats and species are ecologically sensitive, it is important we manage use appropriately (for example applying restrictions on access or lighting) to make sure these environments are protected.

**Enable urban greening** – The greening of vacant land provides an opportunity to enhance biodiversity but each site needs to be carefully assessed and appropriate measures put in place. Improving connectivity between green spaces is important in helping species move through the city. By enhancing the ecological value of amenity space by species-rich meadow planting or woodland coppice, we can create a more comprehensive network of habitats. Greening vacant or derelict land and planted SuDs, will enhance and green the public realm.

**Manage habitats for biodiversity value** – Knowing what we have and increasing our understanding of the natural environment will generate opportunities to enhance it. Appropriate staff training enables better management regimes to be delivered across a range of habitats. We must continue to identify and mitigate risk to the natural environment but also look for opportunities to enhance biodiversity and where appropriate create semi-natural habitats.

**Improve interpretation and learning** – Access to greenspace and nature is important for people of all ages. Evidence suggests that children and young people have less of a connection with nature than previous generations, resulting in reduced physical and mental wellbeing such as Nature Deficit Disorder<sup>15</sup>. We will continue to educate users about responsible use of open space and the habitats and species that thrive there. We will encourage children and families to get outdoors more often to explore nature in our green spaces.

15 - National Trust (2009) Natural Childhood report <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/documents/read-our-natural-childhood-report.pdf>



- Key
- RAMSAR
  - Local Nature Reserve
  - ASSI
  - SLNCI
  - Urban area
  - BCC Area Working Groups with city centre boundary
  - Waterways and waterbodies
  - Surrounding area

Figure 12. Environmental designations

## ***SP7: Be celebrated and support learning***

It is important that our open spaces remain well-used and valued by local communities and that we continue to source funding to enhance these natural assets. Raising awareness of the benefits of open space and educating people about sustainable use is vital, particularly for the next generation of users. Our open spaces offer multiple opportunities to learn about the environment and develop life skills. We will continue to promote the learning potential of our parks and green spaces to as many people as possible.

### **Opportunities to celebrate and support learning**

**Create smart open spaces** – Technology provides options that can help us to understand how people use our open spaces. Mobile platforms with GPS and social media allow real-time interpretation and education, improving visitor experiences. This technology can also provide information on open space facilities and facilitate direct feedback from users. We will work in partnership with small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and Universities to explore innovative ways to understand usage and the needs of local people.

**Support and extend community involvement** – There are a significant number of groups for example friends, community groups and user groups helping to sustain the quality of our parks and open spaces. We will continue to engage with users and non-users to help co-design and shape the future of their local places, as they are vital for the continued success of our open spaces.

**Encourage outdoor learning** – Our parks and open spaces provide a connection to the outdoors. We will continue to work with our partners and the education sector to encourage use of our parks and open spaces as outdoor classrooms to deliver elements of the educational curriculum.

**Promote local value and heritage** – We provide a diverse programme of events and funding for festivals, competitions and activities across our open space network for example local community events, festivals, outdoor musical performances, guided heritage walks and talks, children's fun days, Belfast Mela, Belfast Vital, Spring Fair and Rose Week. We will continue to promote open spaces as hubs for citywide and local events and activities. Many of our open spaces have significant cultural heritage value and we will continue to promote this.

**Promote lifelong learning** – There are opportunities for people to help improve their local open spaces. Volunteers help us manage these places and provide opportunities for local people to improve their neighbourhoods, socialise and develop new skills. We will continue to work with our partners to develop volunteering and training programmes that promote lifelong learning.



# Making it happen - delivery

## Our plan

Through our work to develop this strategy, along with our partners we have agreed a set of headline actions that are currently underway or are planned for the next five years (2019 - 2023). The delivery of the plan will rely on existing budgets or sourcing external and partner funding over the life of the strategy. The headline actions under each of the strategic principles are outlined here:

### SP1: Provide welcoming shared spaces

#### Headline actions

- Develop planning policy to protect existing open spaces.
- Identify specific opportunities within neighbourhoods to enhance and improve access to existing open spaces.
- Identify open space creation, enhancement and access improvements to inform Section 76 developer contribution policies and agreements.
- Use the planning process to ensure open spaces are well-designed, incorporate principles of 'Secured by Design' principles and have a long-term management arrangement secured.
- Ensure that new development proposals and regeneration plans contribute to improving our open spaces network (for example North Foreshore, Sirocco Quays).

- Continue to invest in new open space provision where possible across the city to meet growing demands and local needs.
- Work in partnership to encourage the creation of temporary or meanwhile uses of open space across the city.
- Actively support the development of a sustainable approach to the management and promotion of shared spaces.
- Update our bye-laws and improve enforcement within our parks and open spaces.
- Continue to work with the Belfast Policing and Community Safety Partnership and other stakeholders to improve safety in our open spaces.
- Facilitate stronger community involvement in the management and enhancement of open spaces; for example by working in partnership with Friends' groups, volunteers, community groups and user groups.

### SP2: Improve connectivity

#### Headline actions

- Work to improve access and connections to our existing open space network for example the creation of a pedestrian-cycle bridge at the Lagan Gateway and Ormeau Park.
- Work in partnership to help remove or improve access through peace lines (for example Navarra Place).
- Continue to work with partners to support the creation of greenways across the open space network, such as the 'PEACE IV Shared Spaces, Connecting Open Spaces project'
- Work with partners, where appropriate, to develop under-utilised spaces across the city.
- Deliver planned physical, environmental and ecological improvements to the existing greenways network for example Holywood Arches Greenway's project.
- Develop a strategy to improve legibility of our greenways and community paths across the city, using methods such as consistent design and good signage.

- Improve linkages to the countryside from our open space network and support the creation of better pedestrian-cycle facilities within the countryside around Belfast (for example better public access to the Belfast Hills).
- Promote unique landscapes as destination open spaces, for example Belfast Lough, Lagan Valley Regional Park, Belfast and Castlereagh Hills.
- Work with partners to improve public access to restricted open spaces (dual usage of playing fields).
- Identify opportunities to work with partners to improve the functionality of amenity open space.

### SP3: Improve health and wellbeing

#### *Headline actions*

- Develop an ongoing programme of activity focused on using open spaces to improve health and wellbeing, prioritising efforts in areas of health deprivation with the lowest open space accessibility.
- Identify and create opportunities for natural and informal play.
- Continue to encourage passive recreation by providing appropriate facilities (such as seating areas and shelters) across the open spaces network.
- Continue to maintain, invest and source funding to keep our sports facilities well maintained and affordable, for example physical investment in 3G pitches.
- Continue to encourage active recreation in our open spaces; for example walking, running, cycling, outdoor gyms, growing food and outdoor play.
- Encourage schools to use parks for active recreation and provide greater access to their sports facilities by local communities.
- Continue to work with the health and activity sector to develop programmes in our open spaces for at-risk groups.
- Target urban greening to help improve air quality in the city.

### SP4: Support place-making and enhance the built environment

#### *Headline actions*

- Work with partners to create more green open space in the city centre, for example pocket parks.
- Encourage developers and partners to create meanwhile open space for sites awaiting redevelopment.
- Work with partners to green derelict land across the city.
- Work with partners to animate our public spaces across the city.
- In partnership continue to plan and fund the restoration of heritage assets in open spaces, for example the City Cemetery.

## SP5: Increase resilience to climate change

### *Headline actions*

- Work with Northern Ireland Water's 'Living with Water Programme' (LwWP) to identify open spaces that will help manage drainage and reduce flood risk.
- Identify ways to store rainwater for reuse in the management of our open spaces.
- Develop sustainable management practices in our open spaces for example increase wild flower planting and composting and reduce the use of fertilisers and chemicals.
- Increase tree and shrub planting where appropriate to provide shelter from extreme weather.
- Incorporate an appreciation of climate change risks and opportunities within open space management planning.

## SP6: Protect and enhance the natural environment

### *Headline actions*

- Develop planning policies and management practices that protect existing and work to enhance areas of ecological importance, including priority habitats.
- In partnership, support research that prioritises ecological improvements.
- Improve and create new habitats and natural features that enhances native biodiversity, help enable species movement and meet the objectives of the LBAP.
- Identify opportunities to adopt more sustainable land management practices such as planting species rich meadow to reduce mowing or creating woodland coppice.
- Train and upskill staff on habitat management and maintenance regimes.
- Continue to work with our partners to extend and enhance vegetation along the greenway network.
- Manage and control factors affecting habitat management regimes for example invasive alien species, habitat fragmentation, lighting and disturbance.
- Educate users about habitats and species that thrive in our open spaces, for example by developing and promoting eco-trails.

## SP7: Be celebrated and support learning

### *Headline actions*

- Work with universities and SME's to develop solutions to explore innovative ways to understand usage and the needs of local people.
- Continue to provide and fund a range of community events and programmes within our open spaces.
- Continue to work with our partners and the education sector to encourage more outdoor learning.
- Actively promote the range of activities, festivals and events taking place in our open spaces.
- Identify opportunities to increase income generation activities and funding that will help sustain our open spaces network.
- Celebrate the heritage value and culture of our open spaces through the delivery of community events, guided heritage walks and talks and civic celebrations.
- Continue to work with partners to develop volunteering and training programmes that promote lifelong learning.
- Improve engagement and communications with our open space users and non-users.

## Funding

We spend around £9.5m per year managing and maintaining our open spaces across the city. Since 2012, along with our partners, we have invested approximately £150m in our open spaces.

**Physical Investment Programme** – We will continue to invest and regenerate open spaces in our city and neighbourhoods. Key funding streams for the delivery of this programme include our Physical Investment Programme and funding from partners including the Department for Communities (DfC), Department of Justice (DoJ) and Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA).

**Developer Contributions Framework** – ‘In accordance with PPS8 Open Space, Sport and Outdoor Recreation, we will ensure that new housing development is supported by appropriate open space infrastructure. Paragraph 5.68 of the SPPS establishes the principle that developers will be ‘...expected to pay for, or contribute to, the cost of infrastructure that would not have been necessary but for the development or which needs to be rescheduled to facilitate the development.’ Normally, developers will be expected to provide the open space on-site as part of the scheme. However, in some circumstances, it may be appropriate for the developer to pay a commuted sum to the council for improving existing open space facilities in the area. Financial contributions will be secured by a planning agreement under Section 76 of the Planning (Northern Ireland) Act 2011. Our Developer Contributions Framework provides further guidance on how and when open space infrastructure should be secured through the planning application process.

**Grants and awards** – We may secure funding through grant schemes, where we can show that open space initiatives support delivery of priorities set out by external organisations. We acknowledge the positive contribution which major funders have made towards capital investment projects such as the Connswater Community Greenway (Big Lottery Fund), the restoration of the Tropical Ravine in the Botanic Gardens (Heritage Lottery Fund). We have also benefited from the Urban Villages Initiative to improve existing and create new open spaces across the city and PEACE IV funding to develop the ‘Shared Spaces, Connecting Open Spaces project’.

**Revenue streams** – We will continue to identify more opportunities for increasing income and attracting new revenue streams to help sustain our open spaces. We will continue to facilitate events such as large-scale concerts, encourage smaller commercial concessions and pop-up initiatives and explore sponsorship opportunities.

**Volunteers** – Local communities provide a valuable resource; offering a wealth of expertise, enthusiasm and commitment in supporting open spaces management. Various groups, for example Friends groups, user groups and management committees have been established, which have increased the number of volunteers helping in our open spaces. Where possible, we will support community groups to source funding for open space improvements, events and programmes in line with the council’s open space strategic principles.

## Monitoring and review

This strategy will be delivered with our partners and stakeholders, with the council playing a key leadership and co-ordination role. We will manage and update the database of open spaces by putting in place appropriate mechanisms and standards for collecting and categorising open space data.

Monitoring progress against the headline actions will be an ongoing process. We will review the strategy in 2024 and agree the next phase of actions to be taken forward. Although the strategy sets out what we intend to do over the next five years, some of the actions will be longer term and will be taken forward into the next delivery plan. We also recognise the importance of being flexible and adapting to new challenges and opportunities as they arise.

# How we developed the strategy

We began developing the Belfast Open Spaces Strategy in early 2017 when we commissioned AECOM to support the key activities and a baseline study. This strategy was developed with our partners and stakeholders, with the council playing a key leadership and co-ordination role.

## Key activities

- In 2017, we set up an internal ‘Strategy Oversight Steering Group’ (made up of inter-departmental representatives) to give oversight and guidance.
- In 2017, we established a ‘Strategy Advisory Group’, with representatives from a range of agencies and organisations across Belfast, to help shape the development of the strategy.

- We then organised a series of combined workshops with the ‘Strategy Advisory Group’ and the ‘Strategy Oversight Steering Group’ at key milestones throughout the strategy process. Information from the workshops was reviewed and agreed by participants.

In 2018, we finalised an open space audit, which assessed open space provision, accessibility and future action based on the city’s growth strategy.

We used the Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan (BMAP) open space dataset as a starting point and worked closely with our partners and stakeholders including the Department for Infrastructure (DfI), Department for Communities (DfC) and NI Housing Executive (NIHE) and the Education Authority to source external open space data sets. We now have a comprehensive database of private and public open spaces across the city that has been categorised using our open space typology.

## Where do we go from here?

We will use the open spaces audit to inform area-based working, prioritisation and planning. The diagram below shows the stage we are currently at and summarises the next steps in the process.



# Glossary of terms

Anti-social behaviour (ASB)

Area of Special Scientific Interest (ASSI)

Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan (BMAP)

Belfast Metropolitan Urban Area (BMUA)

Belfast Open Spaces Strategy (BOSS)

Business Improvement Districts (BIDs)

Fields in Trust (FiT)

Green and Blue Infrastructure Plan (GBIP)

Invasive alien species (IAS)

Living with Water Programme (LwWP)

Local areas for play (LAPs)

Local Biodiversity Action Plan (LBAP)

Local Development Plan (LDP)

Local equipped areas for play (LEAP)

Local Government Reform (LGR)

Local Nature Reserves (LNR)

Multi use games areas (MUGA)

National Playing Fields Association's (NPFA)

Neighbourhood equipped areas for play (NEAP)

Northern Ireland multiple deprivation measures (NIMDM)

Planning Policy Statement (PPS)

Programme for Government (PFG)

Regional Development Strategy (RDS)

Sites of Local Nature Conservation Importance (SLNCI)

Strategic Planning Policy Statement (SPPS)

Super output area (SOA)

Sustainable drainage systems (SuDS)





Source: Belfast City Council



**Belfast**  
City Council