**Belfast**
A World Health Organization
**Healthy City**

# Greening the City

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# Introduction

Belfast Healthy Cities Strategic Plan sets out 'greening the city' as a key programme for the organisation during Phase VII (2020-2025) of the World Health Organization (WHO) European Healthy Cities Network, to support the themes of Place, Planet, Participation, People, Prosperity, and Peace. The overall goal of the programme is to create mutually beneficial relationships between citizens and the urban environment for improved physical and mental wellbeing.

Underpinning the overarching goal of the greening the city programme are four strategic objectives that Belfast Healthy Cities have committed to working towards. These are to:

1. **Promote inclusive green environments for all, increasing physical activity and mental wellbeing to reduce the risk of long term disease.**

2. **Encourage the greening of public spaces to mitigate the consequences of climate change, support bio-diversity, and increase recognition that trees and other vegetation are critical urban infrastructures.**

3. **Increase stakeholder collaboration and community engagement in the design of green spaces.**

4. **Promote green space interventions to reduce health inequalities.**

Belfast Healthy Cities have undertaken a scoping exercise to support the development and delivery of the greening the city programme. This has involved a review of evidence and relevant policies and strategies, and discussions with a range of stakeholders working to address issues across the environment, health, and inequalities in Belfast. Details of the organisations involved is provided within the appendix.

These conversations have helped to assess the current understanding of greening the city, identify work taking place on this agenda, and find opportunities for Belfast Healthy Cities to begin to consider supporting or leading in partnership with stakeholders.

## Questions asked to stakeholders were:

1. What is your understanding of greening the city, and its links to health, wellbeing, and health inequalities?

2. What current interventions do you deliver or support that promotes greening the city in Belfast?

3. What further work would you like to deliver to support greening the city in Belfast? As part of the response to this question, consider gaps, priority areas for action, and particular organisations or population groups that may require greater support?

4. What are the key challenges likely to constrain the delivery of the greening the city agenda?

5. How can Belfast Healthy Cities best support the development of greening the city in Belfast?

This paper has been developed to outline the initial findings of these conversations, draw out the common themes being discussed and indicate emerging gaps and opportunities for Belfast Healthy Cities to begin to consider supporting or leading.

# Summary and Analysis

A summary and analysis of the conversation with stakeholders is provided below. These focus on:

- **Stakeholders' understanding of greening the city, and the links to health, wellbeing and inequalities.**

- **Current and future work supporting greening the city in Belfast.**

- **Existing or emerging challenges that will likely constrain the delivery of greening the city policies and projects.**

- **The suggested role Belfast Healthy Cities could undertake to best support partners to progress and realise the greening the city programme in Belfast**

## Understanding of greening the city, and its links to health, wellbeing, and health inequalities

From the discussion with stakeholders, it was clear that there is no agreed definition of what 'greening the city' means. The most common interpretation related to the provision of green and open spaces in the form of parks and playing fields. This was closely followed by the provision of trees and forests.

Those working closely on environmental protection and advocacy tended to draw out the multifunctional benefits of greening. Terms included green and blue infrastructure, nature-based solutions, ecosystems services, and soft interventions. Throughout, there seemed to be a priority given to ensuring these spaces worked for nature, such as the protection and enhancement of biodiversity and landscapes, the mitigation and adaption to a changing climate and flood risks, or addressing noise and air pollution; with some recognition of the benefits to people's health and wellbeing.

In contrast, those working within the health sector focused on the use of these spaces by individuals and groups. Activities included walking, jogging, cycling, food growing, and creating or maintaining social connections, with a focus on children, young people, older people, and those with disabilities or health issues. In addition, community organisations seemed to recognise both of the environmental and health strands, with a particular emphasis on connections to health inequalities.



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Moreover, those working closely on the delivery of developments drew close connections with greening as a part of good place-making and design. There also tended to be links between the terms used to describe greening and localities within Belfast. Organisations working within central parts of the city, for example, tended towards typologies such as civic spaces, public squares, parklets, pedestrian routes, and alleyways. In contrast, those working beyond the city centre would highlight terms such as meadows, hills, landscapes and wildlife corridors.

Finally, there was also a recognition that the phrase 'greening the city' can sometimes be considered a narrow definition. The term 'greening', for example, implies the exclusion of water issues and blue infrastructure. Stakeholders highlighted these terms were an important part of the greening the city agenda, particularly when taking into account the natural features within Belfast and the flood risk challenges. Similarly, the term 'city' encourages a focus on the urban areas of Belfast. However, a large portion of Belfast lies within rural landscapes.

Overall, there seems to be a common intuitive understanding of the term greening the city. There are nuances in its interpretation based on the different spheres of influence that stakeholders have alongside the local environmental features and challenges unique to Belfast. It will therefore be important to recognise the different interpretations of the greening the city agenda, and the need to facilitate a common language and bring stakeholders together.

## Current and future initiatives

All stakeholders highlighted the greening the city agenda is very relevant in Belfast and the current programme of works being delivered.

At a strategic level, Belfast City Council has a well-developed portfolio of strategies, plans and policies. These include the Belfast Blue and Green Infrastructure Plan, Belfast Open Spaces Strategy, Belfast Local Development Plan, draft Air Quality Action Plan, Bolder Vision for Belfast, Belfast Resilience Strategy, and an emerging new Biodiversity Action Plan. Regional government departments are also drafting legislation and plans that closely align with the greening the city programme. These include Department for Infrastructure's Living with Water in Belfast Plan, Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affair's draft Green Growth Strategy, Northern Ireland Executive's draft Environment Strategy, and ongoing work to legislate a Climate Change Bill in Northern Ireland.
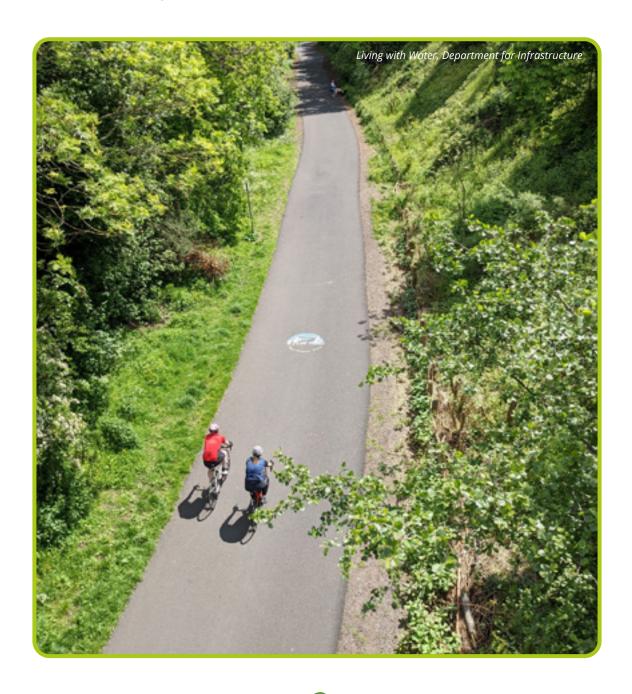
In addition, these strategies and plans are shaped with support and input from environment, health, and inequality organisations, such as Northern Ireland Environment Link, Belfast Hills Partnership, and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds. Looking forward, stakeholders will seek to amend and adopt the strategies that are being drafted, and begin to realise these through action and monitoring plans.

In Belfast City Centre, there are a number of initiatives that are seeking to utilise or integrate greening the city interventions. These focus on regeneration and place making, such as the Belfast Streets Ahead Phase 3 and 5, and Belfast Harbour City Quays Gardens. The promotion of physical and social activity, such as the provision of greenways, enhancement of pedestrian routes, or promotion of walking and people's connections with nature. As well as, interventions to address environmental issues, such as tree planting, protecting and enhancing biodiversity, and improving the multiple functions of green and blue infrastructure to address issues such as climate change, flood risk and air pollution.

Whilst all stakeholders interviewed are engaged with plans and projects that will make a positive contribution to the objectives of the greening the city programme, it was also clear that looking forward, there was an overarching aspiration to support and encourage collaborative design, delivery, and long term management of these green and blues spaces and features. In addition, it is also recognised that some attempt is being made to develop evidence that supports investment for these interventions in Belfast. This included a number of research projects led by Queen's University Belfast such as GroundsWell: Community-engaged and Data-informed Systems Transformation of Urban Green and Blue Space for Population Health; SPACE (Supportive Environments for Physical and Social Activity, Healthy Ageing and Cognitive Health), and Reducing Car Dependency, and the Belfast-THRI(VES) pilot practical research project between Ulster University and Belfast City Council. There is, however, a desire to further develop and disseminate this information

and best practice. Issues raised included a desire to improve access to the Belfast Hills, better connect the network of greenways in Belfast, or assess and improve the quality and use of existing green and blue spaces and features.

Finally, there was a consistent recognition from stakeholders on the need to better understand the network of existing and potentially new green and blue spaces. This included mapping the connections between and access to green and blue spaces, the ability of communities and officers to measure quality and benefits, and an understanding of the users and uses of these areas. Some organisations had begun to consider projects to help address these issues, but there is potentially a need to facilitate and support these areas of work moving forward.

*Living with Water, Department for Infrastructure*

## Key challenges

There were a number of challenges that stakeholders identified which were likely to constrain the delivery of the greening the city agenda in Belfast.  Some of these were overarching or long term issues. Stakeholders, for example, highlighted a lack of funding that prohibited the development and expansion of existing and new initiatives. Similarly, the nature of responsibilities, accountability, ownership, and resources amongst stakeholders was also fragmented, making it difficult to understand and realise each other's roles. In addition, stakeholders indicated competing or changing priorities and agendas were also likely to limit the development of the greening the city agenda moving forward, for example, due to changes in political leaders at the local and regional level. There were also constraints more specific to the greening the city programme. These were the effectiveness of partnership working across the design, delivery and long term management of projects; limited evidence supporting interventions and best practice, and challenges including and engaging communities within the programme, particularly when trying to adequately address health inequalities throughout Belfast. These constraints are drawn out in further detail below.

## Partnerships

Stakeholders recognised the importance of and desire to work across different sectors and disciplines when designing, delivering, and maintaining green and blue policies, programmes, and projects. However, they often highlighted there was a limited capacity to either create these connections or maintain them over time. There were several suggestions why partnership working was difficult.

Firstly, there seemed to be a limited understanding of some of the issues that are core to the greening the city agenda. Stakeholders, for example, suggested there was a lack of a common understanding of terms such as biodiversity, climate mitigation or climate adaption, or water quality and flooding. Similarly, stakeholders highlighted the links between greening the city interventions and health inequalities were either unclear or difficult to understand. As such, when trying to initiate conversations across different sectors and disciplines, there seemed to be a divergence in the language being used, and the issues being discussed.

Some of these differences were well understood, and stakeholders were aware of the competing interests and priorities between different sectors and disciplines. However, stakeholders would also highlight that green and blue projects and programmes, in particular, can bring different agendas together. This included investments to reduce flood risk that can also be used to enhance nature and improve people's access to, and use of, these spaces. If these interventions were also focused in places that had higher levels of socio-economic deprivation, then these initiatives can also support reductions in health inequalities.

It is also worth noting that some stakeholders did highlight different greening the city interventions can also cause tensions between priorities. This included, for example, the provision of lighting which can help improve access to, or safety of, green spaces, but also have unintended adverse impacts on local wildlife. As such, stakeholders recognised that either not being able to realise these mutually beneficial interventions that are inherent within the greening the city agenda, or not being able to identify the win-win solutions were additional barriers to partnership working.

Finally, stakeholders also recognised that collaboration and partnership working was difficult to maintain throughout the design, delivery, and long term management of greening the city interventions. This was particularly important as the benefits of green and blue spaces and features are often realised over very long timeframes, and need ongoing investment to maintain. Stakeholders highlighted some of the reasons why long term partnership working was difficult. This included a tendency to focus on collaboration during the design phases of a project, rather than the delivery and maintenance stages. Limited awareness of the best practice and case studies within and beyond Belfast for maintaining collaboration across the life span of initiatives. As well as challenges in building and maintaining relationships over the long term. This was also linked to capacity issues and limited resources, changes in personnel over time, and changes in political and organisational priorities and agendas.

## Evidence

Furthermore, stakeholders highlighted there was a lack, or limited awareness, of evidence that helped to understand and justify greening the city interventions now and in the future. This related to both quantitative and qualitative research, and examples of best practice within and beyond Belfast.

Firstly, stakeholders highlighted there was limited understanding of the existing green and blue features within Belfast. This involved the location of these spaces. The quality, uses, and users of these areas. The pedestrian connections linking these features together. Knowledge of land ownership across the city. Alongside the links to health, wellbeing, and health inequalities.

In addition, stakeholders highlighted there was limited evidence demonstrating best practices for greening the city projects. Suggested gaps included understanding the most effective interventions across different types and scales of initiatives. Methods to maintain successful partnerships working during the different phases of an initiative; and the processes and structures needed to support this. Alongside, the ability to embed the practice of community involvement and engagement at all stages.



Finally, stakeholders did recognise that some of this information exists. However, they also highlighted that this information was sometimes difficult to access, understand or apply in meaningful ways; making it difficult to use within Belfast.

## Community Engagement

Finally, stakeholders recognised there was an ongoing challenge to engage and include all members of the community when considering the design, management, and delivery of greening the city initiatives, and the use of these spaces. Particular groups were children, older people, refugee and migrant communities, those with disabilities, individuals from poorer socio-economic backgrounds, and those with health issues. Stakeholders highlighted some of the constraints limiting community engagement. These were, difficulties in creating a shared understanding and importance of issues such as the quality of green space, biodiversity, climate mitigation and adaption, and the relationship of these to improved physical and mental health and wellbeing. Limited opportunities for communities to shape greening the city proposals in Belfast, particularly for those from underrepresented groups of users. Challenges in developing a shared sense of ownership of these areas, alongside accessing or using these spaces.

## Potential Gaps and Opportunities

Building on the challenges identified by stakeholders that are likely to constrain the greening the city programme, the interviews provided an initial indication of the gaps and opportunities that Belfast Healthy Cities can consider moving forward. These focused on supporting joined up action and partnership working, the development and sharing of evidence and best practice, and supporting community involvement and engagement in the design and use of these spaces and features. The emerging areas of focus are illustrated in the diagram below, and will continue to be under consideration as the greening the city programme is developed and refined.



### Partnership Working

There was a clear need to help bring stakeholders working in different disciplines and sectors together across the whole lifecycle of greening the city projects and programmes. This stretches from the initial conception and design stages, to the delivery of projects and the long term maintenance of these spaces, which can last beyond 30 years.

From the outset, this will involve developing a common understanding between environment, health, and community sectors when discussing terms such as greening the city, biodiversity, climate mitigation and adaption, air and noise pollution, flood risk, physical and mental health and wellbeing, and health inequalities.

Linked to this, is a recognition from stakeholders that greening the city interventions can bring different priorities together. Sustainable Urban Drainage Systems, for instance, are a core flood risk management technique that can be designed to promote play, recreation, and spaces for biodiversity. As such, there is merit in helping to showcase and promote the positive interconnections that green and blue interventions provide for different stakeholders, alongside case studies and practical guidance that demonstrate how others can design and deliver similar schemes.

As we move further along the life cycle of initiatives, into the delivery and long-term management phases, stakeholders recognised that ongoing and long-term collaboration needs support to be sustained. Again, there will be a need to promote best practices in how this has been achieved, as well as a need to facilitate the structures and building of trust and relationships that need to be maintained over time.

## Suggestions for Developing and Sharing Evidence

### *Mapping green and blue spaces*

Stakeholders identified a limited understanding of existing green and blue spaces and features in Belfast. To address the issue some stakeholders suggested a need to develop easy-to-understand maps and walking routes. Potential outputs highlighted include:

- **Community green and blue space maps and walking routes;**

- **A citywide map of green and blue spaces and walking routes; and**

- **Open data green and blue space maps that can be downloaded or used by organisations and community groups.**

At the neighbourhood scale this is likely to involve organisations that work closely with engaging community groups, such as the community partnerships across the city, as well as those that have neighbourhood level information on the spatial distribution of green and blue spaces and features in Belfast.

At the city scale, this could involve a greater sharing of information of city-wide green and blue networks which is easy to understand, access, and use. This may involve support from universities and local and regional government departments that may hold this information and are able to share it and provide support with mapping software to illustrate the data in easy to understand ways.

In terms of being able to identify opportunities, stakeholders also highlighted it may also be useful to view green and blue space maps in conjunction with maps of land ownership and management responsibilities across the city.

### *Best Practice*

There was also an ongoing recognition from stakeholders of the difficulties in including or making the best use of greening the city interventions. This was linked to either limited awareness of existing evidence and best practice, or a lack of new research highlighting the multiple benefits. There is, therefore, a need to help address this gap.

In the first instance, this may involve encouraging and helping stakeholders to work together to share evidence and best practice that exists or is currently being developed. Stakeholders identified knowledge gaps that may be useful to address. These included the

quality, users, and uses of green and blue spaces, quantifying and monitoring the benefits of green and blue infrastructure interventions, and clearly demonstrating the link between issues, solutions, and health inequalities; such as addressing flood risk through the use of nature based solutions that also promote play, and support biodiversity.

## Supporting Community Inclusion and Engagement

Stakeholders also identified a need to better engage and involve communities with greening the city initiatives. Suggestions involved building the capacity of communities to understand emerging issues such as biodiversity, flood risk, or climate mitigation and adaption. Supporting the development of guidance or toolkits for communities to measure the quality of green and blue spaces and features, and the multiple functions and benefits. Alongside, supporting smaller interventions, such as those that help improve nature on the household or neighbourhood scale or activities to promote social connections and physical activity in the local area.

# Conclusion and next steps

The discussions with stakeholders and review of evidence has enabled Belfast Healthy Cities to develop a baseline assessment of the understanding of greening the city in Belfast, the current and emerging work being undertaken to support the programme, the challenges and constraints likely to affect the development and delivery of green and blue initiatives, and emerging role for Belfast Healthy Cities to consider taking forward. This drew out three core themes:

1.   **The need to build capacity and promote joint working amongst stakeholders.**

2.   **The development and sharing of evidence and best practice.**

3.   **Enabling all individuals and communities to shape and use green and blue spaces and features.**

Belfast Healthy Cities will continue to work with stakeholders to further address the identified gaps and collaboratively take forward opportunities at the strategic and project levels.

# Appendix

## Stakeholders involved in the discussion

Between September and December 2021, Belfast Healthy Cities met with approximately 40 stakeholders that are working to address environmental, health, and inequality issues. Organisations involved in the discussions were:

- **Belfast City Council**

- **Belfast Health and Social Care Trust**

- **Belfast Hills Partnership**

- **Cork Healthy Cities**

- **Department for Communities**

- **Department for Infrastructure**

- **Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs**

- **Developing Healthy Communities NI**

- **EastSide Partnership**

- **Forward South Partnership**

- **Green Party (Party leader for Belfast City Council)**

- **Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful**

- **Linen Quarter Business Improvement District**

- **Ministerial Advisory Group (Architecture and the Built Environment)**

- **Northern Ireland Environment Link**

- **Northern Ireland Housing Executive**

- **Public Health Agency**

- **Queen's University Belfast**

- **Royal Society for the Protection of Birds**

- **Social Democratic and Labour Party (Party leader for Belfast City Council)**

- **Town and Country Planning Association**

- **UK Healthy Cities Network**

- **Ulster University**

- **West Belfast Partnership**

- **YEHA (Youth Education Health Advice) Project**

Belfast Health and
Social Care Trust

Public Health
Agency

Housing
Executive