SD106

Providing Accessible Natural Greenspace in Towns and Cities

A Practical Guide to Assessing the Resource and Implementing Local Standards for Provision in Wales

Project Undertaken on behalf of the Countryside Council for Wales by:

Contents

Introduction

The Countryside Council for Wales believes that accessible natural greenspaces have an important contribution to make to the quality of the environment and to quality of life in urban areas. Such sites are valued by the community, provide important refuges for wildlife in otherwise impoverished areas, and are beneficial to public health and wellbeing. There are established mechanisms for the recognition, designation and protection of sites with special value for biodiversity, and this model does not seek in any way to replace them. Instead, this model provides a broader, more inclusive approach to ensuring that people in urban areas have the opportunity to experience nature close to their own doorstep.

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Achieving Progress

This guidance is based on the implementation of the model based on a staged pathway approach, as shown below in Figure 1. This can be summarised into four equally important phases:

- Inception (step 1 in Figure 1)- the planning phase in which the remit is established, information sources are identified, resources are allocated, the scope of the project set and progress indicators determined;
- Assessment (steps 2-4)- in which data is gathered, local greenspace is identified and its status established against the model, so that the accessible natural greenspace resource is known;
- Analysis (step 5)- which consists of establishing the spatial pattern of accessible natural greenspace and its associated catchment zones, as well as identifying those areas currently lacking in provision;
- Response (step 6)- whereby the priorities are set out for policy and management action to address issues arising from the analysis.

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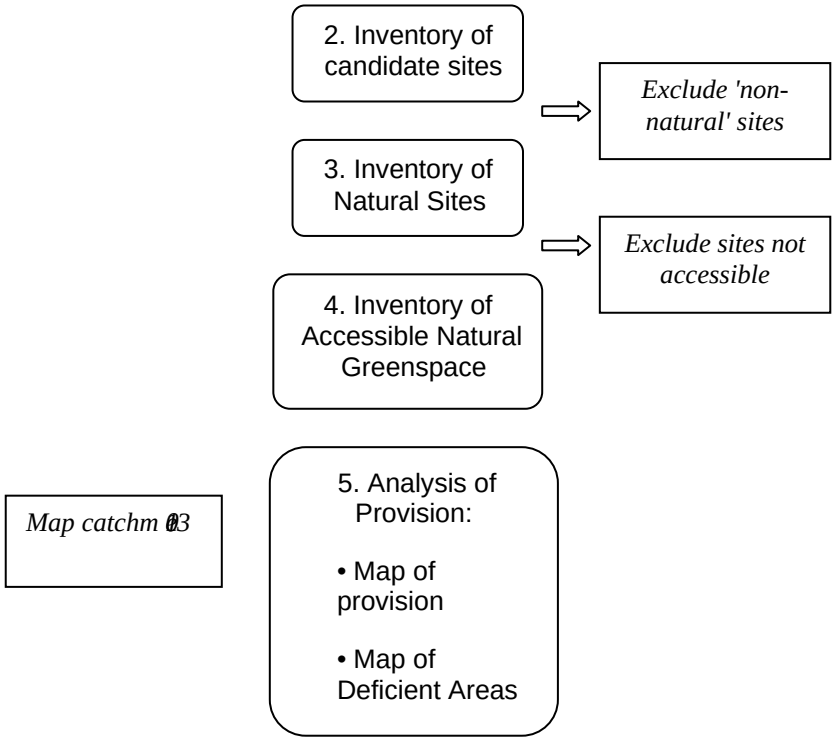
Figure 1: The implementation process



Step 1: Inception

The inception stage is likely to involve a number of activities and the making of decisions on issues that will govern the future conduct and ultimate success of the implementation process. Some important decisions required at this stage might be:

- identify the team responsible for implementation;
- allocate staf

areas of 10km. In order to take full account of areas that are outside of the individual Unitary Authority (UA) administrative area it would be useful to screen for sites on the following basis:

- Any site within 300m of UA boundary;
- 20 ha site within 2km of boundary;
- 100ha site within 5km of boundary; and
- 500ha site within 10 km of boundary.

- Land Ownership. For best results all land should be covered in an assessment for the purposes of implementing the model, as people do not consider who owns the land if it is

Figure 2: Identifying candidate sites from a variety of data sources

Step 2: Mapping the Candidate Sites

The first step in implementing the model is to determine the location and extent of existing areas of greenspace that might qualify. The approach outlined here is tailored for accessible natural greenspace, but could be adapted for inclusion in a more general audit of open space. This process should begin with the compilation of a list of sites for assessment under the model. The content of this list will depend upon the scope of the implementation project but, within that, it is recommended that the list be as fully inclusive as possible, since to limit the range of sites considered will limit the value of the results obtained. Candidate sites can be divided into two groups:

- Pre-qualifying Sites. Sites that have an existing designation as having special value for biodiversity such as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs), National Nature Reserves (NNR), Local Nature Reserves (LNR) and Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINCs) or local equivalents. Sites such as these can be considered to be 'natural' by definition

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In this example, an OS MasterMap base is used to identify areas classified as 'natural greenspace', these can be cross referenced with aerial photographs and site survey data.

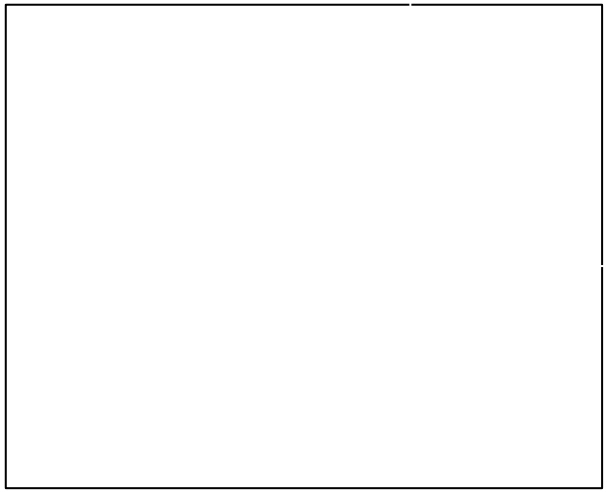


Figure 3: Ordnance Survey Base Data map based on OS MasterMap

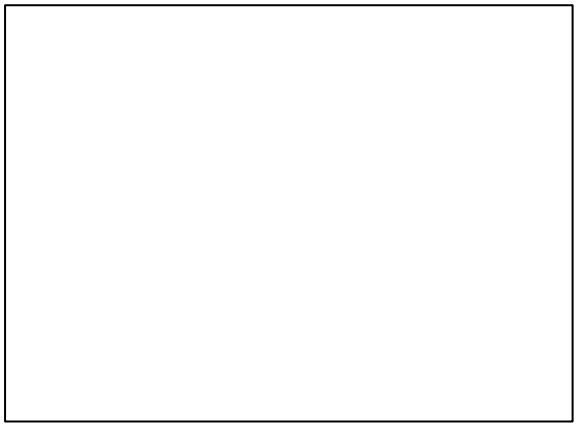
The most reliable means of identifying appropriate sites is through the use of site survey complemented by local knowledge. There are a number of additional datasets associated with the initial inventory phase which can help with identifying sites to survey. An example is:

- Ordnance Survey MasterMap and aerial photographs

Figure 4: Mapping the candidate sites

Figure 5: Examples of candidate sites

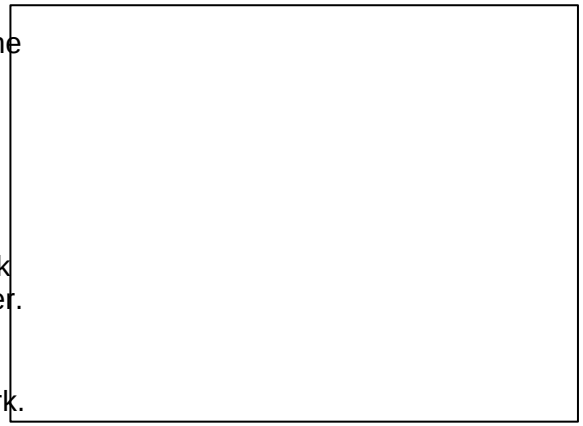
Parks



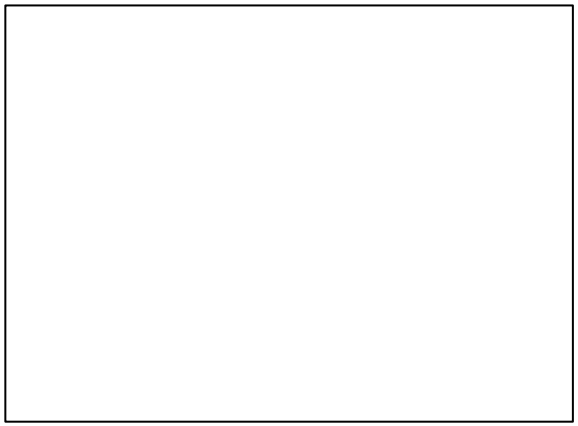
Left. Site 33 A well maintained park in the centre of the case study area. However, the park is lacking in natural features and was therefore considered as non-natural.

Right. Site 7Park with amenity grassland, a pond and a naturalistic tree planting in the background. Note new tree planting to the left. Because of the woodland, the park was considered to have a natural character. A less intensive management of the grassland in suitable areas could further strengthen the natural character of the park.

Parks with natural character



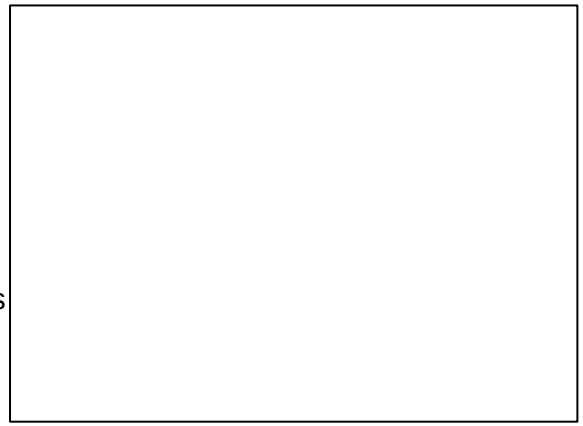
Church yards and cemeteries



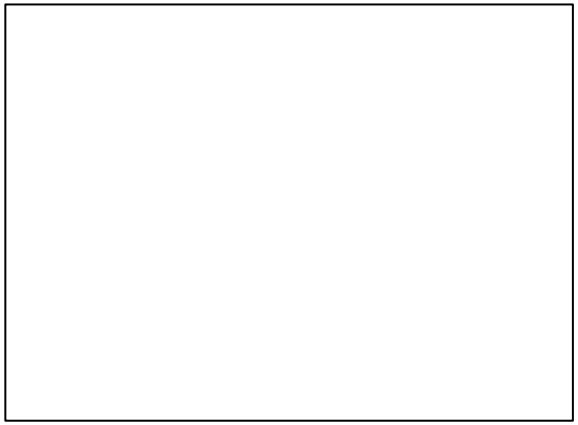
Left. Site 30: A churchyard with non-natural character.

Right. Site 28: This parkland in the countryside around the town was considered as having a natural character mainly because of having impressive rows of trees as shown in this picture in the background.

Parkland



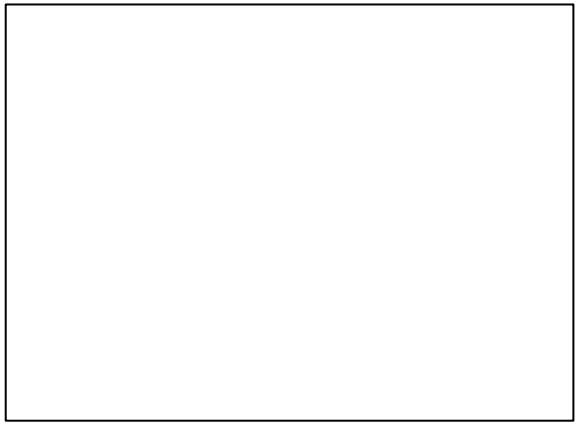
Amenity grasslands



Left. Site 24: Amenity grassland, a common type of greenspace in the case study area with a non-natural character

Right. Site 3: A playing field on school grounds, non-natural in character and with restricted access.

School grounds and playing fields



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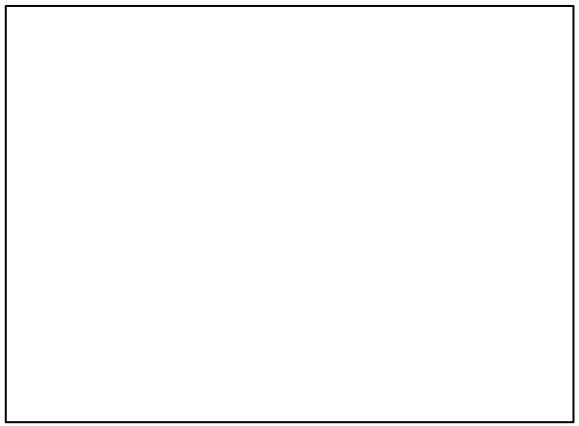
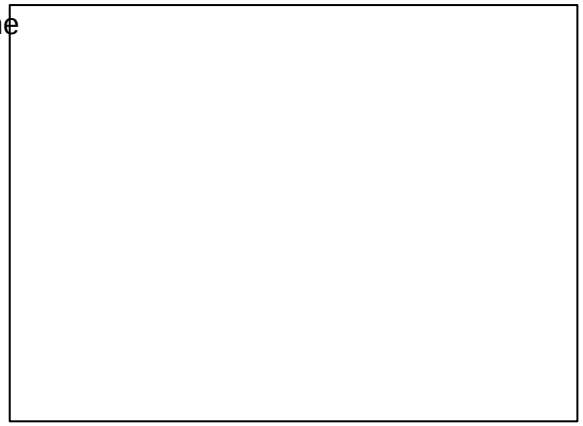
Wastelands



Left. Site 52: A wasteland of a disused railway line mapped as natural greenspace. Disused railway lines can provide important natural greenspace corridors in urban areas both for humans and wildlife.

Right. Site 22: A stream within a park: Establishment of natural stream borders such as reeds would improve habitat quality and give a natural character to the greenspace.

Linear greenspace: streams



We offer a generic definition of 'natural greenspace' but it is not immediately clear how to operationalise this. We hereafter suggest a more pragmatic approach in which a greenspace may be considered as natural when it is predominantly covered by either one, or a mix, of the vegetation structures listed in the following box. A large greenspace may also count for the ANGSt model when it includes smaller natural areas even though these may not cover the majority of the greenspace.

Natural features of greenspace:

1. Woodlands and woodlots with freely growing shrubbery or extensively managed grassland underneath. Trees and tree clumps with freely growing shrubbery or extensive grassland underneath.
2. Freely growing scrub and dwarf shrubs (e.g. heathland).
3. Rough grassland, semi-improved grassland, wild herbs and tall forbs.
4. Rocks and bare soil where natural succession is allowed to freely occur (including bare soils in wastelands).
5. Open water and wetlands with reeds, tall forbs, etc.
6.

identify places generally *perceived* as natural although not necessarily recognised as such in ecological surveys. These surveys are also an important means to better understand the needs of local residents, the current uses of greenspace and barriers to their current and future use. Interviews with local people and interest groups, such as local Wildlife Trusts, can also provide important information unavailable from other sources.

Worked Example: Identifying 'Natural' Sites

This stage of the process involves examining the 'candidate' sites in order to determine whether or not to consider them to be natural. The map below, at Figure 7, shows the results of this process (note by comparison with Figure 4, how many of the candidate sites have been excluded at this stage). The excluded sites may still have a role to play, as these are candidates for action to improve the provision of accessible natural greenspace through changes in the management regime.

In order to keep the process simple, all of the sites with recognised

Figure 7: Mapping the distinction between natural and other greenspace

Figure 9: The natural character of the coast

Step 4: Is a natural area accessible?

There are many factors that contribute to the accessibility of a greenspace, and they can act together in complex ways. Accessibility encompasses a spectrum from the purely visual to the right to enter a greenspace, move about freely and experience it without disturbance. There is therefore a gradation of accessibility but for a site to be included as 'accessible' it must be possible to enter it.

In conducting an accessibility check, there are a number of issues that need to be resolved to establish conditions on the ground and then to assess the level of accessibility that is possible. For this purpose we divide access into five categories (Figure 10):

1. Full Access: Entry to the site is possible without restriction.
2.

It is recommended that an accessibility check be conducted on all of the greenspaces, including those with no formal designation for nature conservation value. The reason for this is that some of the designated sites may be particularly sensitive to disturbance and damage through public access and therefore it may be necessary to restrict or even to discourage visitors. Given the social and educational benefits that such sites confer on the urban environment every effort should be made to ensure at least conditional access.

While some accessibility factors directly affect the assessment of a site, others will be factors that affect its catchment zone; these will come into play in a spatial analysis at a later stage. These will be physical factors such as the number of access points and the effect of barriers on the approaches to sites, such as railways, roads and rivers; the influence of these effects will be discussed later (see page 29).

Access to coastal sites can be considered in the same way as for other sites. For instance, standing on the promenade overlooking a beach could be considered to be proximate access, while restricted access due to the tide would be a conditional access factor.

It is important that some verification of the usage of sites is conducted from time to time, as attitudes towards a greenspace among the local community will influence whether it provides effectively for their needs. A high quality natural site with excellent access facilities will not be fulfilling its potential unless the local community makes effective use of it. Equally, if a site is well used by some sections of the community but is hardly used at all by others then it may not be providing for local people as it should. It is therefore important to identify and understand the social factors underlying such effects, so that practical action can be taken to rectify significant problems in the spirit of the “Access for All” policy of the Welsh Assembly Government. For example, research has shown that provision of good quality footpaths and ranger services can greatly enhance site use by women.

The Accessible Natural Greenspace Inventory

At this point in the process an inventory has been compiled of sites that have met the criteria as 'natural' and 'accessible' and which can therefore be classified as *accessible natural greenspace*.

Box 5: Case Study: The Countryside Agency's ***"Visitor Welcome Initiative"***

Described as *"guidance for recreation site managers on providing a welcoming environment"*, this slim, practical guide presents a series of checklists to enable the assessment of many of the factors that affect the accessibility of a site to the public. Although for the purposes of the model physical access is the key element, the full consideration of access is considered good practice, and *The Visitor Welcome Initiative* provides a practical means of doing this.

The guide divides sites up into four categories and sets out standards for each. The site categories are:

- Type A: roadside picnic sites and viewpoints
- Type B: informal 'walk around' sites
- Type C: supervised sites
- Type D: prime sites.

A Worked Example: Identifying Accessible Natural Sites

In this stage the natural greenspace sites are examined to determine whether people are able to gain access to them. There are many factors that may impact on accessibility, and it is recommended that these be considered as criteria when examining the quality of sites. However for the purposes of implementing the model it is simply necessary to verify whether the public are able, legally and physically, to enter a site and to move about within it.

Figure 12 shows what effect even this simple test might have on the greenspace map, as a number of natural greenspace sites have now been excluded on accessibility grounds. For the purposes of the model it is necessary only to distinguish between sites that qualify as accessible and those which do not, and that is the basis of the map at Figure 12. However any further qualitative distinctions applied can be readily displayed, while refinement to show the presence of individual factors that affect accessibility is also possible. Later, it will be demonstrated that physical access factors, such as the location of access points and transit barriers can be located on the map and their effects accounted for and displayed automatically by the geographical information system software.

Figure 12: Mapping accessible natural greenspace

Step 5: Analysing Provision

In order to conduct effective analysis of provision, some basic data about the sites is needed:

- the site should be ***located*** on an appropriate map,
- the ***boundaries*** of the site should ois of3f pd3o017 d d d9l1EMC .00.0004 Tw 2.950.45eeded: 24 Td <0078>Tj /TT2w 2.c001 Tc 0..0008/MC.001

Figure 14. Mapping site catchment zones by network analysis

It is now possible to undertake an analysis of *accessible natural greenspace* provision in the context of the model. First, the overall provision of accessible natural greenspace per 1000 population should be calculated and used as a guide to overall provision. The next step is to examine areas that are apparently deficient in accessible natural greenspace, and this is done by highlighting the areas on the map that fall outside the catchment zones of the identified sites. These areas lacking in provision can themselves be mapped and locations where the population is poorly served can be indicated. In this way decision-makers have a useful visual tool to aid in the setting and communication of priorities for local communities.

It should be remembered that the model has four tiers of provision. It is therefore possible that a location satisfactorily served at three tiers, might still be lacking in provision at the fourth.

The mapping of deficient areas is a tool of only blunt instrument, as they

Available tools: the planning system

There are a number of ways that the planning system can be used to support the achievement of objectives for natural greenspace provision :

- the use of planning policy to identify the key elements of the strategic greenspace resource and to protect it effectively, perhaps as part of a greenspace network;
-

Setting Action Priorities

Planning the right mix of actions in response to the accessible natural greenspace assessment may not be straightforward. A number of different approaches are available and some may be more difficult to apply than others. Reasons for this might include resource constraints or administrative complexity. Action-planning should always be rooted in the local assessment of the greenspace resource and its aims, objectives and targets should be realistic. In order to achieve this it might be appropriate to work within a hierarchy of action and spatial priority, focusing first on the highest priorities and actions which yield the biggest impact for the investment made:

- Spatial Priority could be given to actions to address deficient areas or other greenspace priorities such as the enhancement of greenspace corridors within the urban area;
- Action Priority should be given to actions that are likely to be easiest to implement and achieve the most gain for the least resource input. It is suggested that generally this will be as follows:
  - action to improve accessibility to sites by maintaining high quality footpaths, providing additional access points, removing access inhibitors such as litter and vandalism, providing simple off-site infrastructure to overcome access barriers such as roads, rivers and railways or by facilitating access to private sites by negotiating management agreements with landowners;
  - action to manage existing greenspace for change by reviewing sites in local authority ownership to see if opportunities exist for making areas within existing sites 'natural' through management action;
  - action to create new accessible natural greenspace sites through the planning system by means of tools such as supplementary planning guidance, development briefs and Section 106 agreements. The development planning system is potentially a powerful tool at the disposal of a local authority, and much might be achieved through its appropriate use; and
- Special Priority could apply to action programmes linked to other cross-cutting priorities, such as the tackling of social exclusion by enabling the greater use of accessible natural greenspace by the disabled, women or ethnic minorities.

Areas Resistant to Improvement

In many urban areas there may be zones which lack access to natural greenspace and for which significant improvements are not realistically possible. These areas can be improved by using techniques that introduce a measure of green structure into the urban context, such as:

- planting street trees; roof and wall greening;
- developing 'pocket parks' and quality residential greenspace;
- creative conservation within school grounds and industrial sites.

These approaches may not improve the level of provision of natural greenspace, but could contribute to the improvement of the urban environment and enhancement of the quality of life in the short term. In the longer term, opportunities should be sought to develop more significant additional provision of greenspace.

Monitoring:
Provision of accessible natural greenspace and progress made in implementing the standards should be monitored at regular intervals. We recommend to link monitoring to the cycle of the unitary development plan review.

Worked Example: Planning Action in Response to an Assessment of Provision

It has been shown that the hypothetical urban area has significant zones lacking in the provision of accessible natural greenspace. In considering how to address these it is first necessary to ask a number of questions about the existing greenspace resource:

- are there existing natural greenspace sites to which accessibility is limited?

Figure 19: The positive impact of proposed actions from Figure 18

Conclusion

This guidance has presented local authorities with a practical method for implementing the ANGSt model for the provision of accessible natural greenspace in towns and cities. The model need not place onerous demands on staff and technical resources and can provide excellent support to decision-making on manageme

Bibliography

This bibliography presents a sample of important background material and useful practical guidance for those seeking to work with the Accessible Natural Greenspace Standards model. It is not intended to be exhaustive and there is much other useful reference material available.

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