Providing Accessible Natural Greenspace in Towns and Cities

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

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Contents

Foreword

Everyday contact with nature contributes to people's quality of life. English Nature's Accessible Natural Geenspace Standards provide benchmarks for assessing the provision of places where people can experience and enjoy nature. These standards form part of the guidance published by Government on strategic open space provision. Further information about these standards can be found in English Nature Research Report 526, 'Accessible Natural Green Space Standards in Towns and Cities: A Review and Toolkit for their Implementation', available at **www.english-nature.org.uk/pubs/publication/PDF/526.pdf**.

This guide provides a suggested methodology and advice on applying these standards. It recognises that there are no absolute definitions of what is 'natural' and 'accessible' and that these aspects of greenspace need to be considered in the context of the broader geographical area being assessed.

The Companion Guide to Planning Policy Guidance 17 Open Space, Sport and Recreation advocates the use of a range of tools such English Nature's Accessible Natural Greenspace Standards, but acknowledges that they may need to be adapted to reflect local needs and circumstances. The guide also recognises the multifunctionality of greenspace with most areas supporting a range of different activities and uses, but that for the purposes of open space strategies it is useful for the main function (or primary purpose) to be identified.

English Nature welcomes such approaches and is keen to promote the importance of accessible natural greenspace for the enjoyment of nature, informal children's play, gentle exercise and environmental education as well as for conserving wildlife and geological features. In addition, such areas can contribute to natural drainage processes, improving air quality and moderating urban microclimates.

English Nature is, therefore, keen to see its accessible natural greenspace standards used in the preparation of comprehensive open space strategies, integrating nature conservation with other greenspace functions, but recognising those areas where the conservation of biodiversity or geological features is the primary function.

This guidance is published as an evaluation draft and English Nature is keen to receive feedback on its usefulness and how it might be further developed and improved.

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Introduction

English Nature 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 and designation 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.

What is the Accessible Natural Greenspace Standards Model?

English Nature believes that local authorities should consider the provision of natural areas as part of a balanced policy to ensure that local communities have access to an appropriate mix of greenspaces providing for a range of recreational needs. English Nature recommends that provision should be made of at least 2ha of accessible natural greenspace per 1000 population according to a system of tiers into which sites of different sizes fit:

- no person should live more than 300m from their nearest area of natural greenspace;
- there should be at least one accessible 20ha site within 2km from home;
- there should be one accessible 100ha site within 5km;
- there should be one accessible 500ha site within 10km.

The purpose of this model is to guide local authorities in identifying the current level of provision of accessible natural greenspace and to assist with the production of local standards and targets. While it is expected that local authorities should aspire to meet the provisions of the standard, it is recognised that this will be more difficult in some urban contexts than in others. Local authorities are therefore encouraged to determine for themselves the most appropriate policy response in the light of a sound understanding of the standard, the needs of the local community and the value of accessible natural greenspace to it, the existing greenspace resource and funding constraints.

The model should be viewed as a point of reference against which to assess the natural greenspace resource and from which local targets for continual improvement can be developed, as yardsticks for progress towards an aspiration to meet its requirements as fully as possible. Implementing the model is the starting point for a creative process of greenspace planning and management, and not an end in itself. This guide is intended to outline a general approach to the use of the model and to present options as to how this might be tailored to suit available resources and the local context.

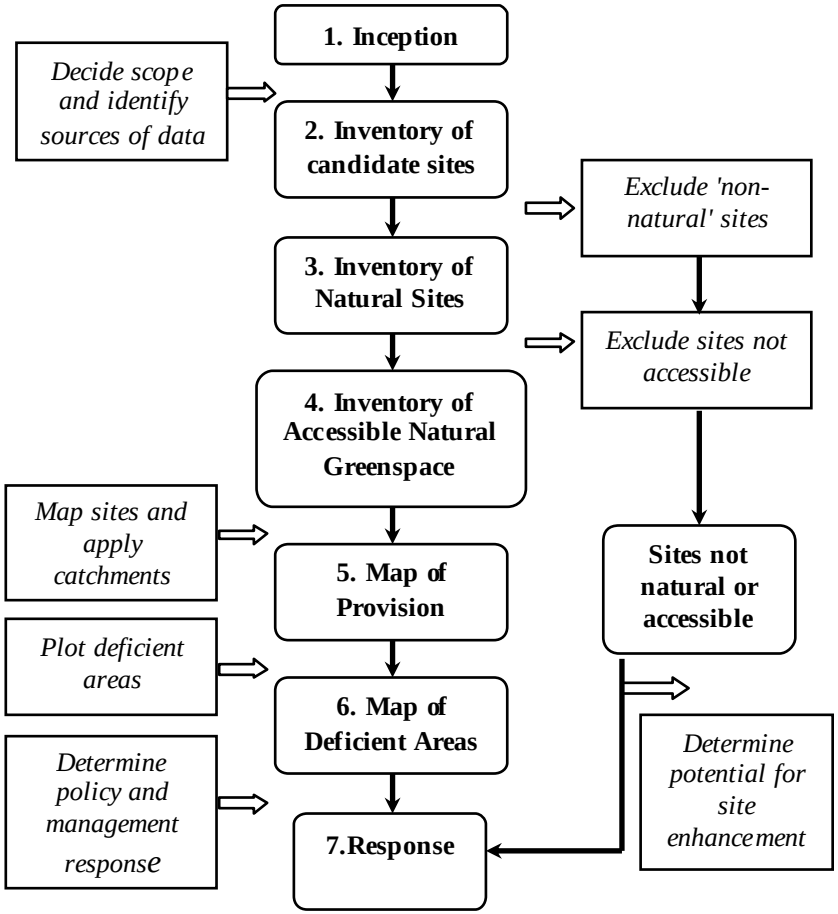
Achieving Progress

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 team is established, information sources are identified, resources are allocated, the scope of the project set and progress indicators are determined;
- **Assessment** (steps 2-4)- in which data is gathered, local greenspace identified and its status established against the model, so that the accessible natural greenspace resource is known;

- **Analysis** (steps 5 and 6)- 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 7)- whereby the priorities are set out for policy and management action to address issues arising from the analysis.

Figure 1. The implementation process.



This process is likely to produce the best results when it is implemented as part of a strategic commitment by a local authority, involving key stakeholders and with the objective of integrating and balancing the policy response with the needs of other policy areas.

The planning system will provide an important means of ensuring that key elements of the accessible natural greenspace resource are protected and of achieving improvements in levels of provision. However, there is also great potential for improvements to be made through the enhancement of existing greenspaces by management means, and this is likely to be the most immediately useful approach to improving provision. Changes to the management regimes of greenspaces already under local authority control can be effectively planned and controlled according to priority and demand.

Accessible Natural Greenspace in an Open Space Typology

The model can be applied alongside a typology designed for other purposes. The model typology for greenspaces recommended by the Urban Green Spaces Task Force[1], for instance, is as follows:

- parks and gardens;
- country parks;
- natural and semi-natural urban greenspaces;
- green corridors;
- outdoor sports facilities;
- amenity greenspace;
- provision for children and young people;
- allotments, community gardens and urban farms;
- cemeteries and churchyards;

[1] *Green Spaces, Better Places- The Final Report of the Urban Green Spaces Task Force*, 2002, p.43, DTLR, London.

The majority of accessible natural greenspace is likely to fall within the *country parks, natural and semi-natural urban greenspace* and *green corridor* types. However, **all** the categories of open space suggested in Final Report of the Urban Green Space Task Force might include accessible natural greenspace, while it might also be found in other locations, such as institutional grounds and industrial estates. The model aims to consider all natural greenspace that is accessible, regardless of ownership and status.

This point is well illustrated by the recommendation made in English Nature Research Report No. 153, *Accessible Natural Greenspace in Towns and Cities* (Harrison *et al.*, 1995, p6-7), that a definition of natural greenspace should include:

- "*sites awaiting redevelopment which have been colonised by spontaneous assemblages of plants and animals;*
- *land alongside water-ways, transport and service corridors which, although perhaps once deliberately landscaped or planted are now mixtures of planted and spontaneous assemblages;*
- *tracts of 'encapsulated countryside' such as woodlands, scrub, heathlands, meadows and marshes which, through appropriate management, continue to support essentially wild plant and animal assemblages. Often these natural areas exist within the framework of formally designated public open space;*
- *ponds, ditches, rivers, lakes and reservoirs;*
- *the less intensively managed parts of parks, school grounds, sports pitches, golf courses, churchyards and cemeteries;*
- *incidental pocket-sized plots along residential and commercial roads, pathways, car parks and property boundaries, including walls and built structures which are often spontaneously colonised by plants and animals; and*
- *allotments, orchards and gardens."*

However, creative site management might make it possible to develop areas of accessible natural greenspace within existing sites that have a range of other primary functions. The willingness to consider greenspace as potentially multifunctional is therefore key to the effective implementation of the model.

The model is intended to be a positive addition to the tools available to local authorities working to meet the needs of their communities. It provides a flexible and inclusive method for the understanding of the existing local greenspace resource and a decision support mechanism for the determination of future policy. It is not intended to be an unwarranted impediment to development where local priorities dictate otherwise, nor is it intended to promote the provision of natural greenspace at the expense of other types of open space of value. The model promotes the concept of *multifunctional* space whereby an area of managed parkland or playing fields could also be said to be natural, at least in part, if the appropriate criteria are met. This guide explains how this might work in practice.

Starting Out: 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 staff and financial resources;
- fix the scope and timescale of the project;
- set progress milestones; and
- specify how the results of the project should be presented.

Activities to be undertaken at this stage would be those providing key information to inform the implementation process, such as:

- identify stakeholders for consultation;
- review of national and local policy; and
- survey for relevant existing sources of useful data and appropriate tools to assist the process.

Approaches to Implementation

Implementation of the model can be approached in several different ways, for instance in order to suit the level of available resources or for the purpose of a limited trial. Broadly, three approaches are possible:

1. **Full Implementation** of the model will yield the most complete results to inform policy and action development, and is therefore **recommended as the ideal**. Clearly, full implementation is the most complex option and is therefore likely to demand the highest input of time, money and technical resource. In view of this it is recognised that, while full implementation is the end goal, this may not always be possible at the outset of the project.
2. **Progressive Implementation** allows for the initial implementation of only a part of the model with the intention of expanding coverage in future reviews until full implementation is gradually achieved. In this way an initially limited project allows for the development of familiarity and confidence of working with the model to be developed at a controlled pace. However, implementing in this way implies that only limited results would be available, which might be of restricted usefulness for policy and action-planning purposes.
3. **Selective Implementation** utilises only specific elements of the model and implies no firm commitment to the expansion of coverage in future reviews. This option allows for some implementation to be achieved with limited resources but will produce results of limited value. However, expansion of coverage could then be achieved readily should additional resources become available.

These three options can be applied to various elements of the implementation process to provide genuine flexibility in the application of the model. Some possibilities are as follows:

- **Site Size Tiers.** The model gives four tiers for site size and catchment and a measure for provision by population (see page 1), all of which should be assessed in a full implementation. However, it would be possible to work with a single tier of the model initially. Although, the largest sites may be the more straightforward to consider, it is recommended that the Tier 1 (most local) sites are always covered, in view of the smallest, 'neighbourhood' sites being the most accessible to local communities.

- **Spatial Scope of Analysis.** A full implementation of the model would include the largest site sizes and their catchment areas of 10km. In order to take full account of areas that are outside of the individual LA administrative area it would be useful to screen for sites on the following basis:
  - Any site within 300m of LA 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 accessible and provides the necessary quality of experience. However, initially it would be possible to base implementation solely on, for instance, local authority land. The local authority is likely to be the single most important holder of accessible greenspace and may possess existing data that would potentially aid the assessment process. However, any limitation of land coverage would inevitably underestimate the amount of natural greenspace accessible to the public.
- **Complexity of Catchment Analysis.** The simplest way of showing catchment zones is to simply apply a perimeter of appropriate radius around the boundaries of sites. This technique, known as **buffering**, can be carried out manually or through the use of a Geographical Information System (GIS) to yield a useful, if simplistic picture of the spatial pattern of provision.. However, if a GIS is used, it is possible to apply a more sophisticated technique, **network analysis**, which allows factors such as actual walking distance and access barriers to be accounted for. This reveals a more realistic picture of site catchment zones, but requires more detailed data and a greater degree of technical expertise to implement.

Another important element of the preparation for implementing the model is the identification of appropriate data sources and tools. In terms of data, this document suggests a number of spatial data products that can assist in the process of identifying candidate sites. All of these data are available in digital form and suitable for use within a GIS. Regular audits of open space are the recommended means for developing a robust and current dataset, but opportunities might also exist to approach this in other ways, for instance by making use of other ongoing survey initiatives or by working in partnership with other bodies.

Whilst, the use of a GIS is not essential for the implementation of the model, it is strongly recommended. A GIS application will facilitate efficiency and flexibility in allowing:

- the integration of different datasets and survey data
- the use of a variety of analysis techniques to help with assessing current compliance with the standard;
- an assessment of the best policy options towards the ultimate goal of full compliance; and
- communication of the results and policy decisions to the public.

Effective planning on these issues from the outset will make implementation easier, more consistent and allow for more rational and consistent interpretation of the results.

The Implementation Cycle

Effective use of this model depends on its regular review as part of a recognised cycle. This is necessary in order to ensure:

- that the analysis and the data on which it is based are kept current;

- that changing local priorities, legal requirements and national policy guidance are recognised and accounted for;
- that priorities are revised to account for changes in patterns of need and in levels of available resources; and
- That familiarity with the model is maintained and the scope of its application adjusted as required by changing circumstances.

Deciding on a cycle for reviewing the analysis will depend on a range of local circumstances. However many local authorities may find it convenient to make a link to the five year cycle of local development plan review, which would facilitate 'joined-up' policy making by ensuring that each process could be fully informed by the other.

In the longer term, **Extension** of the model's principles is considered to be the way forward. Implementation of the model to its full scope and, through a holistic approach, beyond to assess the whole greenspace resource within the urban area, might help to provide a balanced means for devising a comprehensive strategy for planning and management. Whilst it is important to be mindful of these wider aims, guidance for their achievement is beyond the scope of this document, which concentrates instead on the practical implementation of the model as it stands. However, potential avenues for progress will be discussed as the conclusion to this publication.

Case Study: The Initial Evaluation of the Model in Manchester

The City of Manchester has conducted a trial to evaluate the use of the model in Manchester. For initial simplicity the scope of the project was limited to:

- sites within the City boundary which were owned by the local authority and managed by the Leisure Division;
- the two most local tiers of the model, with catchment zones of 300m and 2km;
- sites already categorised as natural or semi-natural in character;

Taking this approach allowed a degree of expertise to be developed relatively quickly but yielded results that were of limited usefulness. The restricted scope of the exercise excluded sites that would be likely to contribute to the level of provision of accessible natural greenspace and therefore resulted in an incomplete picture of provision and an exaggeration of the deficient areas.

However the exercise has provided the City with a foundation in the use of the model that can be developed in future exercises to the point at which it provides a sound , comprehensive analysis with which to inform policy development.

Greenspace Assessment: 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, Local Nature Reserves and Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINCs) or local equivalents. Sites such as these can be considered to be 'natural' by definition and accepted as such without further review, though it will be necessary to assess their accessibility.

- **Potential Sites.** The second list would include all other sites thought to potentially meet the requirements of the model. Selection of these sites needs to be approached in a number of ways, including local consultation, analysis of maps and from aerial photographs.

It is suggested that, for best results, the assessment include the smallest sites that can practically be identified. No minimum size limit is suggested within the model, but it is recognised that there may be practical reasons for local authorites electing to apply one. However such a decision should be made as part of the project inception process.

Worked Example: Candidate Sites

In this guide the process of implementing the model will be illustrated in relation to a hypothetical urban area. Although based on the map of an actual city, the worked example is completely hypothetical to demonstrate the range of circumstances that local authorities might encounter. At each stage the impact of the process will be shown on the map of the urban area and key issues highlighted.

The greenspace inventory can be done by straightforward desk study, tending towards the inclusion of any sites of uncertain value, as it is better to apply the 'precautionary principle' at this stage. Sites are best included when there is uncertainty over their status as they can easily be excluded later on. The diagram below shows how this process might work, drawing on a number of existing sources of information.

There is no single data product that provides an appropriate definition of natural greenspace suitable for this work. However, a number of useful datasets have been identified that can be integrated within a GIS or that can be examined as hardcopy to assist with the inventory task. Figure 2 shows how this process might work, drawing on a number of example sources of information, and Figure 3 illustrates the outcome in detail.

The most reliable means of identifying appropriate sites is through the use of local knowledge and site survey as identified in the previous section, although 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

In this example, an OS Master Map base is used to identify areas classified as 'natural greenspace', these can be cross referenced with aerial photographs and site survey data in order to determine the an appropriate classification in terms of the model.

When the hypothetical urban area is subjected to this process, the picture that emerges is shown in Figure 3. Notice how, at this stage, the sites are shown by their primary categories within a local greenspace typology. In this example coverage is of sites in all ownerships, not just that of the local authority. In this way it is possible to include a number of private golf courses and institutional grounds, among other sites.

A Minimum Site Size

In deciding whether a minimum threshold for site size should apply within the model, two questions need to be addressed:

- **is there an area below which a site cannot offer experience of nature to the visitor?** If so, it has not proved possible to identify a single universal threshold. This is because the ability of a small site to provide a natural experience is dependant on its surroundings, the structure of the site itself and the perception of visitors to it. Each of these three factors is so variable that the performance of such sites can only be assessed individually as part of a survey exercise.
- **are there operational factors that suggest an area below which local authorities will have practical difficulties surveying, mapping or managing a site?** There are paractical operational factors which might suggest a minimum site size. These include existing limits for: identifying sites in a local development plan; adopting sites for local authority management; and for grant-aided urban forestry schemes.

For practical reasons a minimum size threshold of 0.25ha is therefore proposed, though local authorities might find specific local circumstances which suggest a different limit.

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

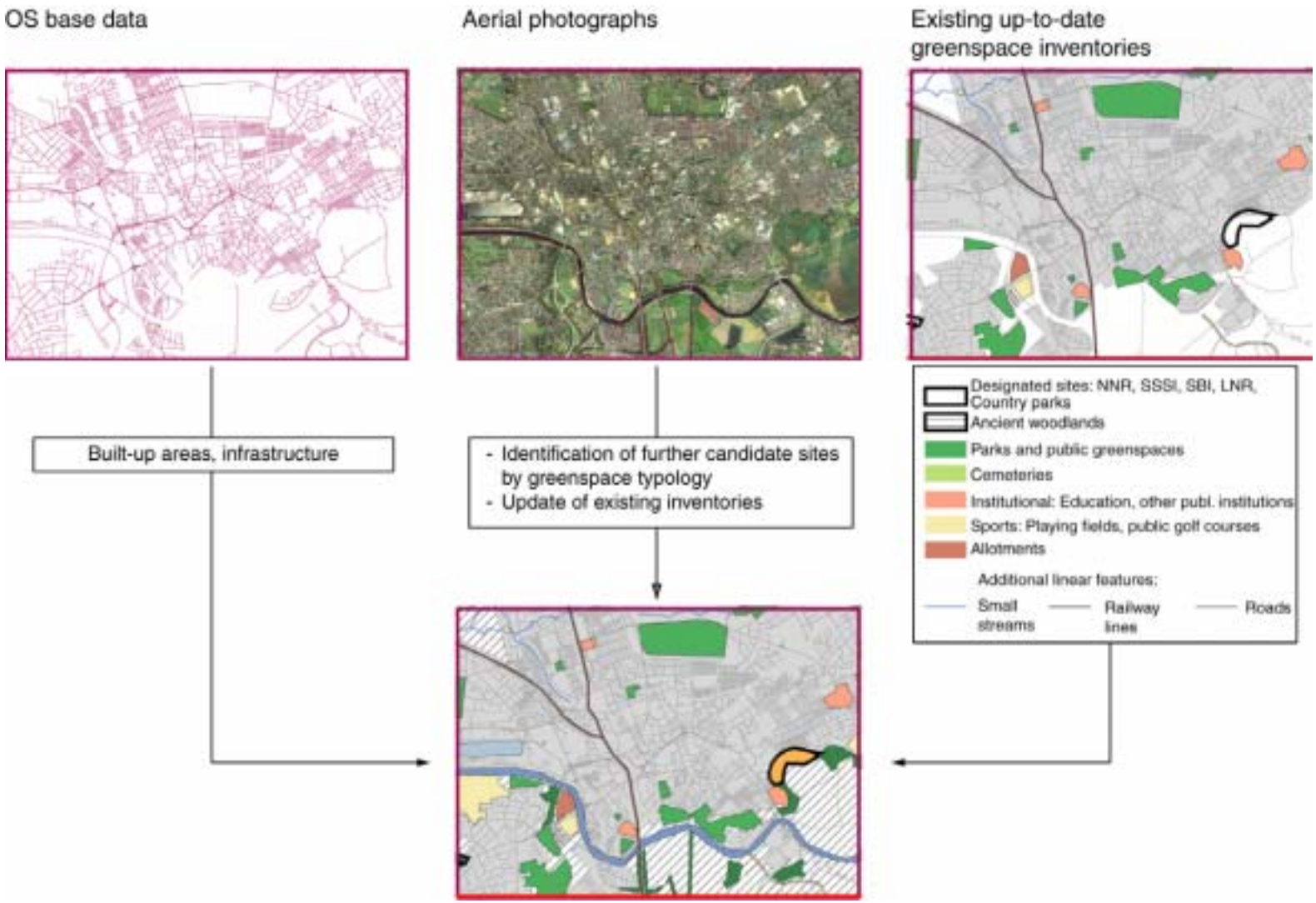
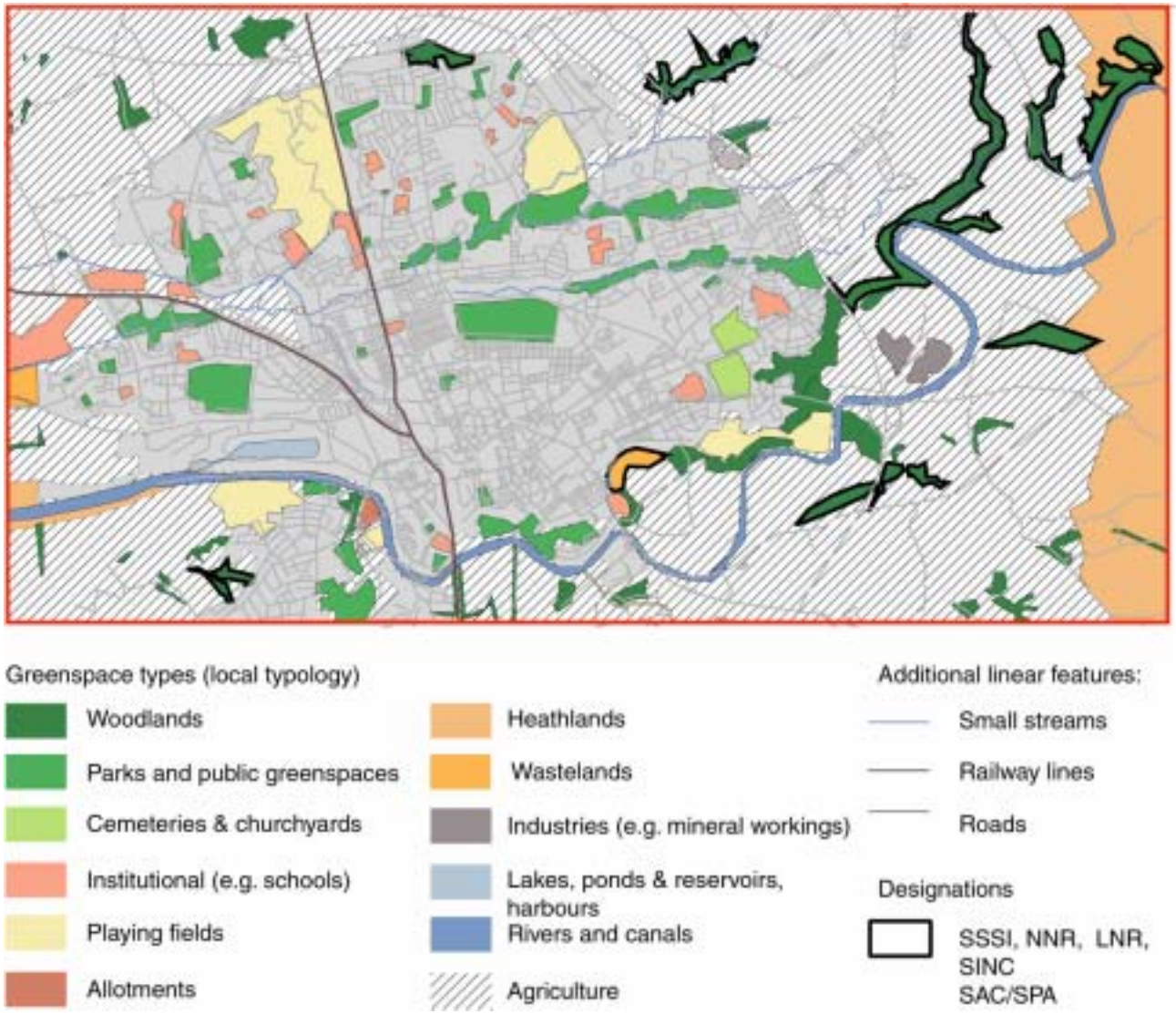


Figure 3. Mapping the candidate sites



Greenspace Assessment: Is a candidate area natural?

Green space types

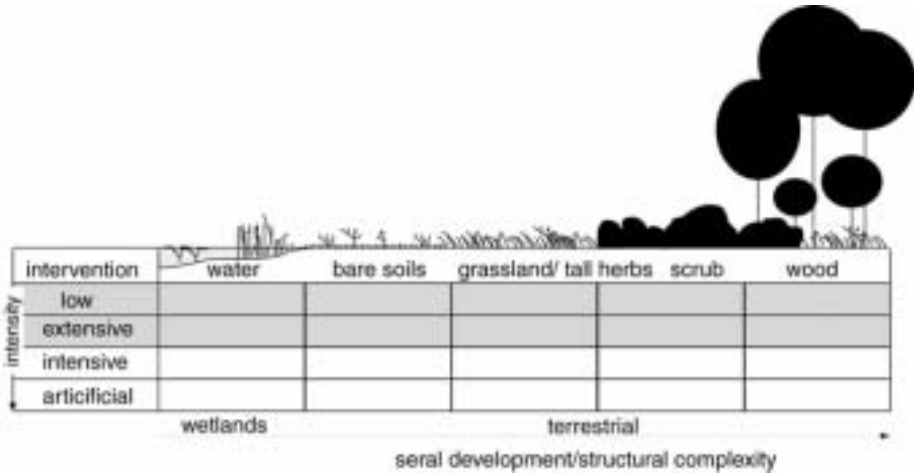
The aim of this model is to promote the provision of natural places accessible to people in urban areas. Towns and cities comprise a great variety of green spaces, from woodlands and farmlands to designated greenspaces such as parks and playing fields, as well greenspaces on institutional grounds, private land, allotments, post-industrial wastelands and along railway lines, among others.

The experience of nature is not restricted to places traditionally considered as natural, such as woodlands, but can also be found in parks and other designated greenspaces. Greenspaces are particularly attractive when they offer the opportunity to engage in different activities, and where the possibility to experience 'wild' nature is integrated into a formal setting. Sometimes the vegetation on sites will be self-sown but this is not essential[2], and so the model is therefore particularly supportive of well-maintained multi-functional greenspaces.

In view of this, the model adopts a comprehensive approach to defining natural greenspace, recognising that there are many different types of greenspace where nature can be enjoyed, and that there is a continuum from 'wilderness' to managed greenspace and paved places which can still include natural features such as mature trees and fern-clad walls. 'Natural' is here considered as a particular character of urban greenspaces, regardless whether these are woodlands, heathlands, formal parks or greenspace on institutional grounds.

In order to identify natural greenspace, the major distinction is made based on the intensity of intervention, whether this is management or any other form of disturbance. For instance, plantation woodland can have freely growing herb, grass and shrub layers underneath and would then be considered as natural greenspace. Tree plantings with frequently-mown amenity grassland, on the other hand, would not normally be considered as natural. Equally, rough and semi-improved grasslands would be considered as natural whereas amenity grasslands would not be included. Figure 4 shows the basic principle of this approach. For each of the green structures shown, from woodland to bare soil and open water, a progression exists from natural to artificial.

Figure 4. Identifying natural greenspace



[2] In English Nature Research Report 153 (Harrison *et al.*, 1995), natural greenspace was defined as *"Land, water and geological features which have been naturally colonised by plants and animals and which are accessible on foot to large numbers of people."* This guidance suggests that this be interpreted broadly to include designed and managed sites of natural character as 'natural' for the purposes of the model

Thus, a greenspace may be considered as natural when it is predominantly covered by either one, or a mix, of the following vegetation structures:

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 (single specimen trees might also be included as well as areas with a high density of single trees such).
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 mudflats, dunes, etc.).
5. Open water and wetlands with reeds, tall forbs, etc.

The above definition still leaves considerable place for interpretation and a collection of photographs are shown below to illustrate this. Ecological surveys such as Phase I habitat mapping provide an excellent source of information for identifying natural greenspace based on a well-established methodology, but need to be adapted to the local context. The National Vegetation Classification, especially Volume 5 (*Maritime Communities and the Vegetation of Open Habitats*), might also be a useful reference. User surveys can provide a complement to 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 provide important information unavailable from other sources.

A Photographic Approach to Recognising Natural Greenspace

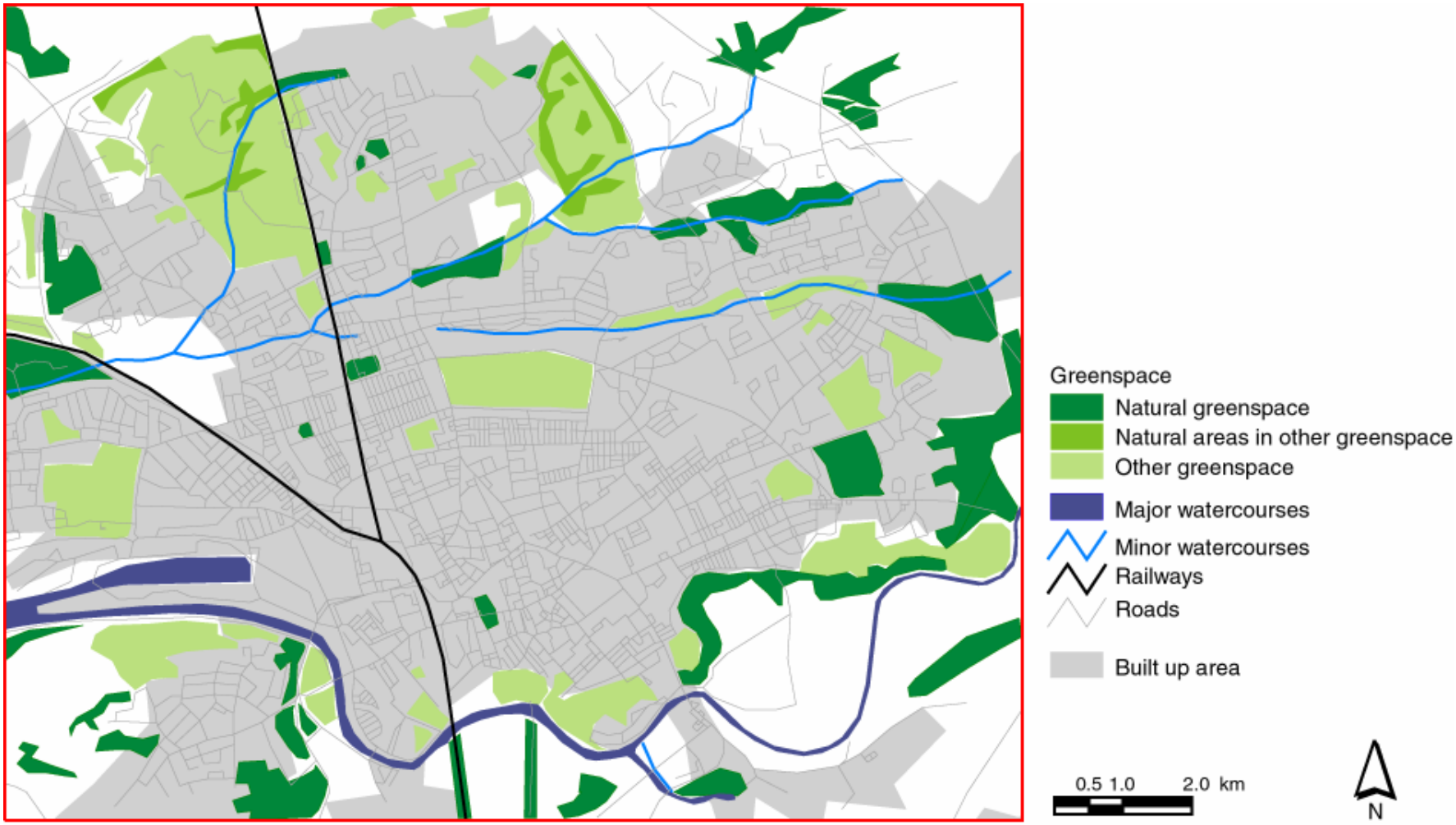
In order to illustrate what is meant by the term 'natural greenspace', a range of photographs is presented, with explanatory text explaining their status under the model. However it is recognised that this is not an exact science and that there will always be cases of uncertainty that are best addressed through the sound judgement of those conducting the assessment.

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 5, shows the results of this process (note 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 designations for nature conservation value have been included as natural without further consideration, which reduces the number of sites that require examination. Sites that do not fully meet the definition of 'natural' greenspace, but which contain significant natural areas, have also been shown.

Figure 5. Mapping the distinction between natural and other greenspace



Examples of Self-sown Natural Greenspace

Woodlands: ranging from ancient to successional on derelict land

Rough grasslands, heathlands, bog

Open water with reed beds, etc.

Extensively managed grassland

Succession on bare soils

Examples of Natural Character in Public Greenspace

Parks with natural character

Public greenspace lacking natural character

Cemetery with natural character

Cemetery lacking natural character

Playing fields lacking natural character

Greenspace Assessment: 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. The threshold for a site to be considered to provide sufficient experience of nature for the purposes of the model is considered to occur at the point at which physical entry to a site is possible.

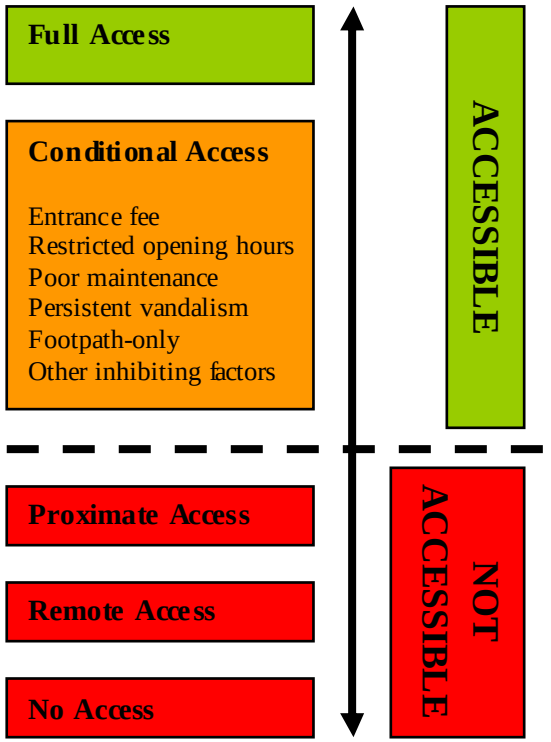
In conducting an accessibility check, there are a number of issues that need to be resolved to establish conditions on the ground and then to assess the level of accessibility that is possible. For this purpose it is possible to divide access into five categories (Figure 6):

1. **Full Access:** Entry to the site is possible without restriction.
2. **Conditional Access:** A right of entry exists which is subject to or affected by one or more restrictions or conditions that may affect the quality of the natural experience enjoyed by the visitor.
3. **Proximate Access:** There is no physical right of access but the site can be experienced from its boundary, where a close-up visual and aural experience of nature may be available.
4. **Remote Access:** No physical right of access exists and the proximate experience is limited, but the site provides a valuable visual green resource to the community along a number of distinct sightlines and at distance.
5. **No Access:** No physical right of access exists and views of the site are largely obstructed.

Proximate access is not considered sufficient because physical exclusion from the site remains. In order to be considered sufficiently accessible to satisfy the needs of the model, sites must be either **fully** or **conditionally** accessible. The factors inhibiting the use of conditionally accessible sites should be identified and, where possible, action taken to address them.

Therefore, for the purposes of the model, accessibility is taken to mean the ability of visitors to physically gain access to a site (sites which satisfy this criterion are then considered to exert a catchment zone upon the surrounding area).

Figure 6. Assessing Accessibility



It is recommended that an accessibility check be conducted on all of the greenspaces, including those with formal designation for nature conservation value and candidate sites that were not assessed to be natural. The reason for this is that some of the designated sites may be particularly sensitive to disturbance and damage through public access and therefore discourage visitors. In such cases it may be appropriate to conclude that such a site is not currently accessible, while considering if appropriate measures can be put in place to provide appropriate conditional access for visitors in the future.

While some accessibility factors affect the assessment of a site, others will be factors that affect its catchment zone 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 railway lines, roads and rivers. The influence of these effects will be discussed later (see page 21).

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 are extremely important to ensuring that 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.

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*. This inventory now forms the basis for conducting analysis of the provision of accessible natural greenspace in the context of the English Nature model.

Case Study: The Countryside Agency *"Visitor Welcome Initiative"*

Described as *"guidance for recreation site managemers 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.

Sites are then assessed against standards under seventeen checklist headings, which include identification of visitor needs, access for all, site entrances and exits, paths and trails, site care and site staff, among others. The local adaptation of this system for use on urban greenspace sites could provide a good basis for the assessment of access quality in addition to simply confirming that physical access is available.

Case Study: Recognising the visual and structural value of greenspace

The contribution that greenspace of all types makes to the visual and structural character of urban areas is not part of the model, but can be recognised by other means. Harrogate Borough Council has a policy (HD12) within its local plan which states this in respect to a broadly -defined category called 'amenity open space' which must:

- be an open space within the built up area;
- be physically and/or visually accessible to the public; and
- make a significant contribution to the appearance and/or character of a settlement, either individually or in combination with other spaces.

These sites are marked on the proposals map and a presumption of protection from development is stated on the basis of the preservation of the character and appearance of settlements. The accessible natural greenspace model is not, in itself, a mechanism for the protection of greenspace sites. However, it might be possible to link its use to approaches such as that taken in Harrogate in order to achieve local planning objectives.

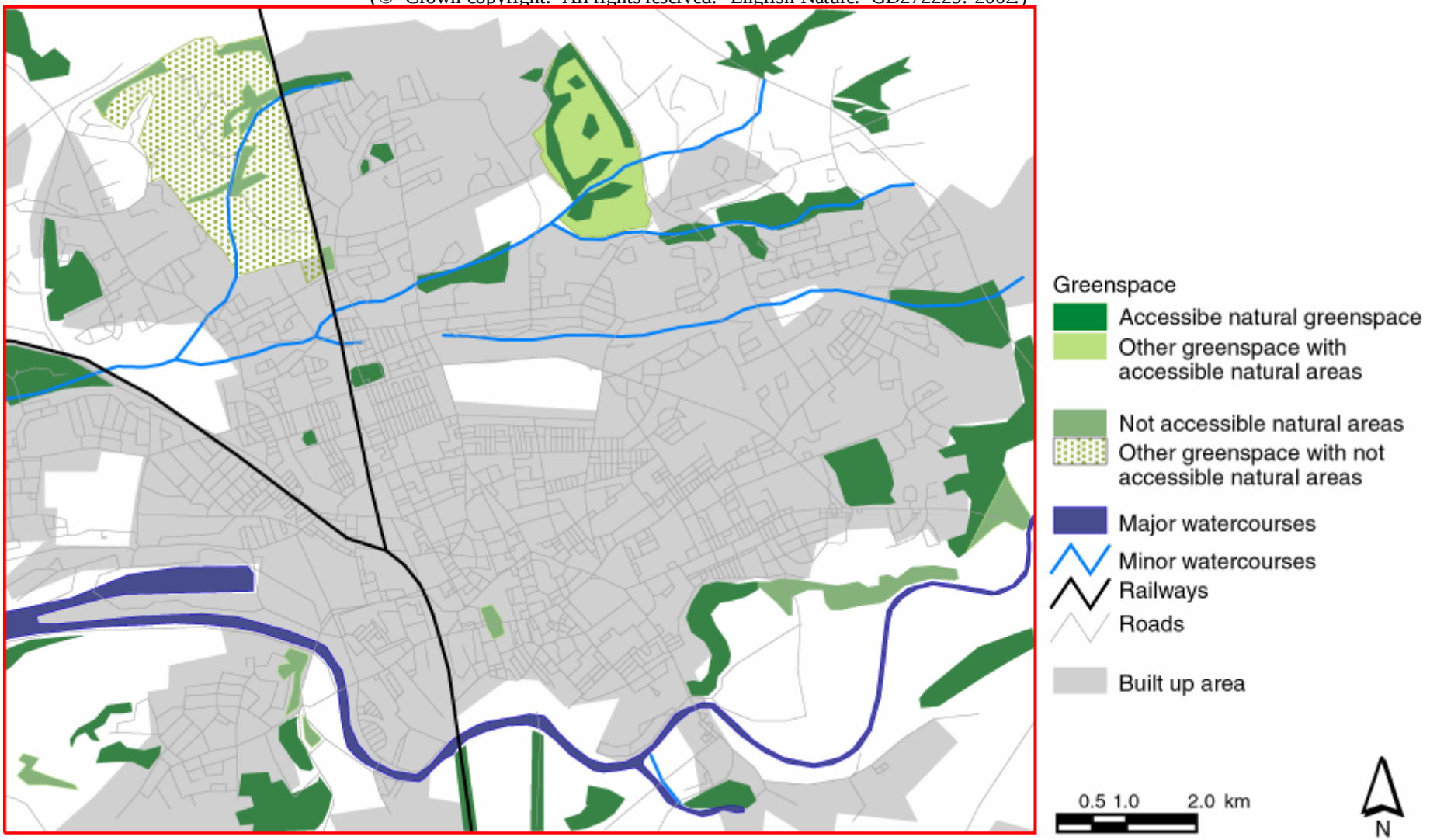
Worked Example: Identifying Accessible Natural Sites

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 7 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 7. 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.

Examples of conditional access factors include, among others, vandalism (top left), litter, poor footpaths (top right), periodic closure (left) and entry restrictions for safety or other reasons (right)

Figure 7. Mapping accessible natural greenspace



Greenspace Assessment: Analysing Provision

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

- ∉ the site should be ***located*** on an appropriate map,
- ∉ the ***boundaries*** of the site should be identified,
- ∉ ***points of access*** to the site should be plotted,
- ∉ the ***area*** of the site should be noted.

The next step in a full implementation is to place each site into the model's site hierarchy in order to determine the appropriate site catchment zone as follows:

- ∉ Tier 1: sites up to 20ha: catchment zone 300m[3],
- ∉ Tier 2: sites of 20-99ha: catchment zone 2km,
- ∉ Tier 3: sites of 100-499ha: catchment zone 5km,
- ∉ Tier 4: sites of 500ha or more: catchment zone 10km.

In applying these tiers, it is important to note that larger sites also serve their local community, and should be analysed accordingly. Thus for a site of 120ha, three zones should be applied: 5km, 2km and 300m.

The zones of accessibility are best represented graphically by application onto a map, ideally using GIS. There are a number of ways of doing this:

- ∉ drawing a simple distance buffer around the boundaries of a site,
- ∉ taking distance measures from points of access to a site,
- ∉ calculating actual distance along principal routes of access (network analysis).

The quality of the analysis is improved by applying the second and third of these options, but the complexity and difficulty is increased. While even the first option, applying a simple buffer, provides a very useful illustration of spatial patterns of accessibility, it is recommended that implementers should apply the third option, actual distance from site access points, as this provides a much more realistic picture, especially at the local level. If it is only possible to carry out simple buffer analysis, further modification of the results could be carried out in order to take account of major barriers and other forms of impediment which the method has not taken into account.

It is recommended that site catchment zones are mapped at each tier of provision, to provide a full picture. However should this not be possible, a staged implementation may be conducted, concentrating on a single tier to begin with and deepening the analysis later. If this option is taken, it is recommended that Tiers 1 and 2 (the most local sites) should take initial priority with others following as practicality allows. In order to assess compliance with the model, the level of provision at each Tier can be combined onto a single map using GIS overlay.

It is now possible to undertake an analysis of *accessible natural greenspace* provision in the context of the model. The first 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.

[3] The 300m catchment is a calculated straight-line equivalent to 400m actual walking distance. As **network analysis** calculates actual walking distance, 400m should be the figure used when employing this technique.

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 relatively blunt instrument, as they are a purely spatial demonstration of patterns of accessible natural greenspace provision. In an ideal world the local authority would recognise each area lacking in provision and take action to eliminate it. However, it is recognised that in real terms this will rarely be possible, and local authorities are accordingly encouraged to use the analysis to decide appropriate local responses in the light of available resources and competing priorities. In addressing areas where provision is lacking, local authorities might consider the following options for prioritisation:

- areas with high population density might be prioritised;
- areas with low general provision of greenspace of all types might have priority;
- areas where communities have limited mobility might be prioritised for increased local provision;
- areas where it is possible to create coherent greenspace networks might be prioritised; or
- areas with a large proportion of space taken by private gardens might receive lower priority than areas of high urban density.

Finally, the overall provision of accessible natural greenspace per 1000 population should be calculated and used as a guide to overall provision.

It is possible to conduct analysis at smaller scales than that of the whole local authority, such as according to electoral wards. If this is attempted attention should be given to the regular movement of population, in addition to residential patterns. For instance, some town centres may have very low permanent populations but high temporary ones during working hours, for which there may also be a need to provide accessible natural greenspace.

Worked Example: Analysing Provision

At this point it is necessary determine the sizes of the parcels of land we have identified as accessible and natural in the previous stages of the work. Here, the use of a GIS has enabled site areas to be determined easily as parcel size is either an integral component of the data or is readily calculable within the system. From this basis, it is then straightforward to classify particular sites into the Tiers identified above, and which will be used to determine the appropriate catchment size to be applied.

Once this is complete the catchment areas of the accessible natural greenspaces that have been identified can be plotted, in order to begin to build up a spatial picture of provision. In Figure 8 catchment areas have been assessed through the use of distance buffers, with the radius of the buffer set according to the size, or tier category, of the site. In this example, for ease of visual interpretation of the results, only two Tiers have been considered. Note that there are obvious barriers to access, such as railways and rivers, that are not automatically considered using this approach. Figure 9 has used network analysis to help identify those zones which should be excluded (these can be removed from the map at this stage) and to calculate catchment based on actual walking distance.

The larger sites have multiple catchment zones and a seemingly large site can be given a buffer from a lower tier because it only has a low proportion of natural cover within it. Even this relatively simple map shows patterns that provide potentially very useful information for planners and the public. It is possible to refine this even further by

plotting zones of accessibility to take account of site access points and by undertaking network analysis of approach routes, but this higher quality information requires the commitment of additional time and expertise.

If site access point data are available, it is possible to calculate distance buffers from these points to produce a slightly more representative picture, although it should be noted that the general drawbacks of the simple distance buffer approach still apply. Where access points are known and can be added to the GIS database it is recommended that a network analysis approach is applied in order to get the most representative picture of the true catchments of sites. It is, however, recognised that the application of this method will require the commitment of additional time and expertise. It is important to note that using a network analysis approach the 300m buffer rule for the smallest sites should be extended to 400m but the distance measures for the other Tier sites should be kept the same.

Figure 8 illustrates the effect of using a network analysis approach on the extent of the catchment zones in our hypothetical example.

Those areas not covered by site catchment zones are deficient in provision according to the model. These areas can be readily plotted and provide a key indicator of zones within the urban area that may be inadequately served by the local greenspace resource and which may accordingly attract priority focus for action to improve provision. In this hypothetical urban area the deficient areas indicate that large parts of the urban area may suffer from a lack of provision.

Figure 10 compares the distribution of areas of deficiency with population data derived from the 1991 Census of Population. This can enable the targeting of policy towards areas of high population density. Using other data sets such as deprivation indices it would also be possible to add further information which may help in prioritising different candidate greenspace sites from the initial inventory to be made accessible and/or natural as appropriate.

Figure 8. Mapping site catchment zones by buffering

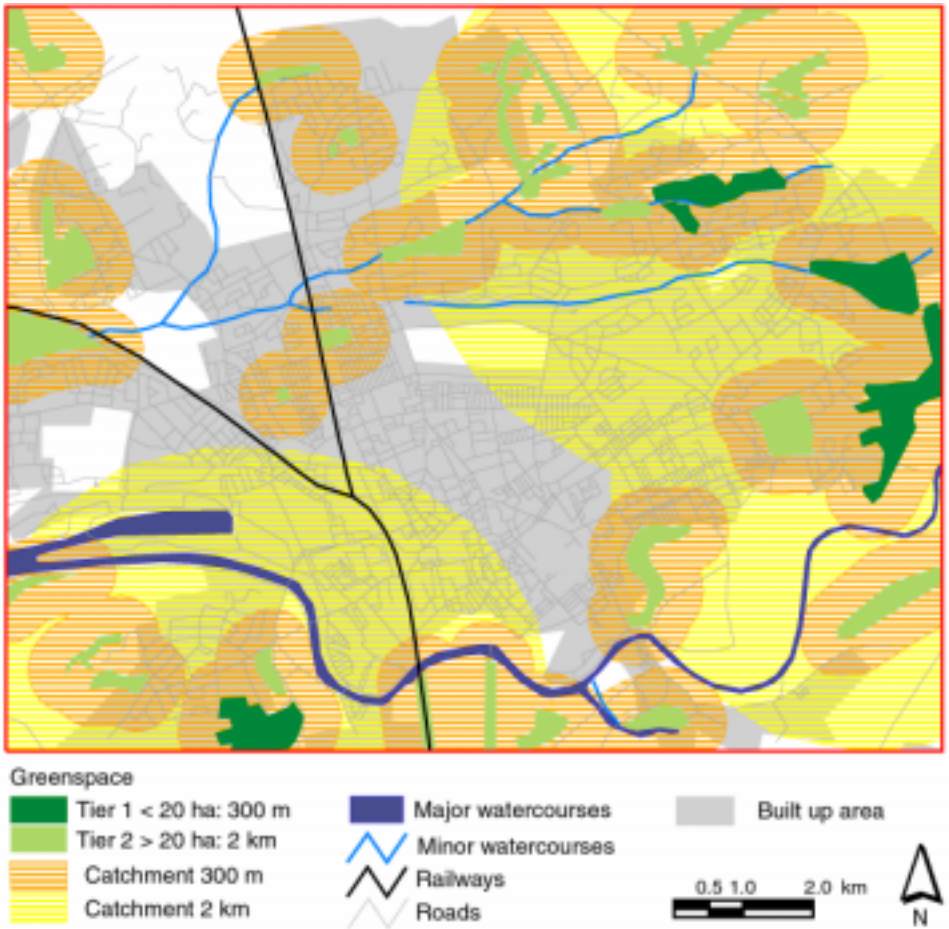


Figure 9. Mapping site catchment zones by network analysis (© Crown copyright. All rights reserved. English Nature. GD272229. 2002.)

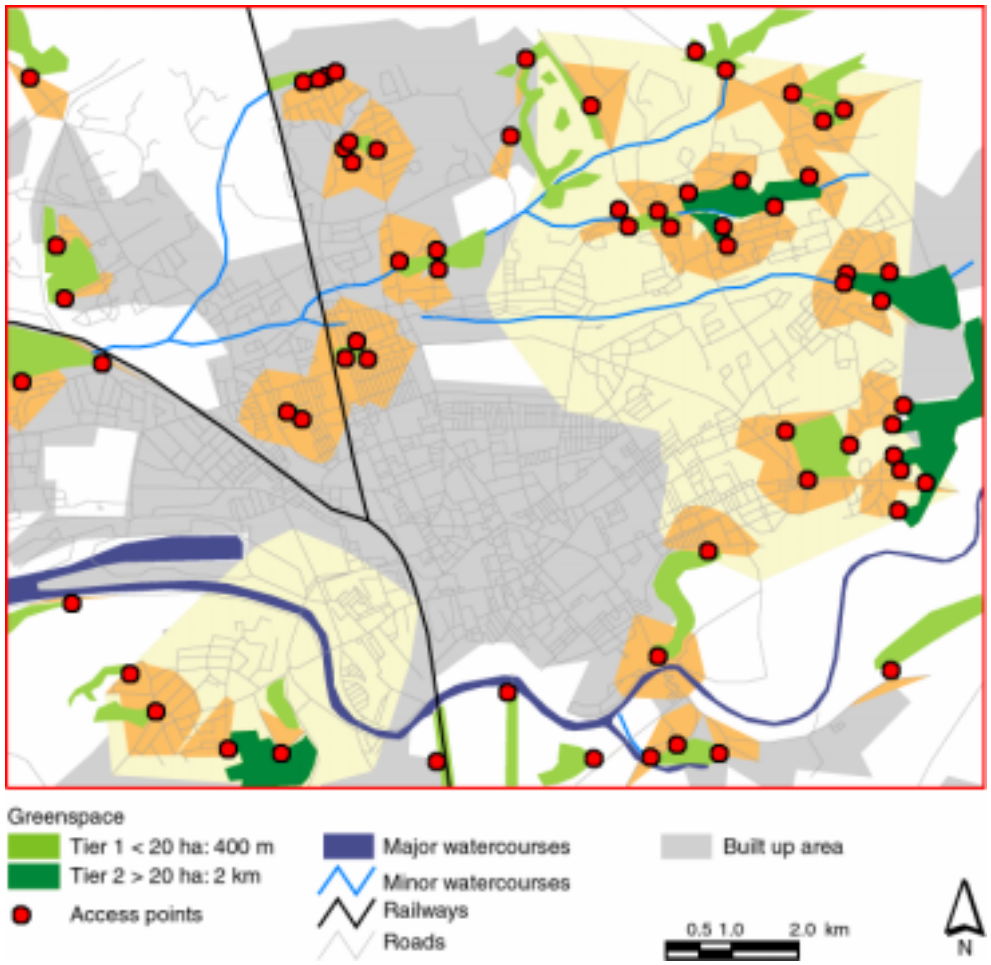
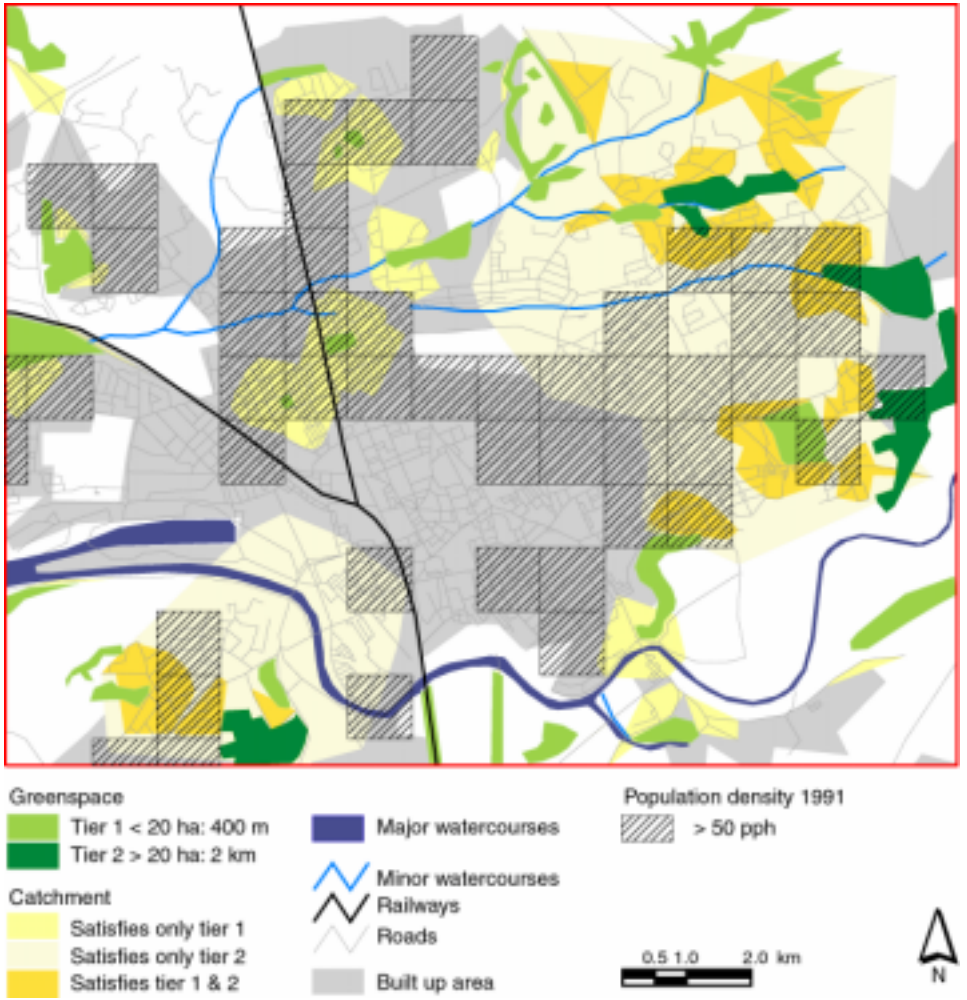


Figure 10. Mapping accessible natural greenspace provision against population density (© Crown copyright. All rights reserved. English Nature. GD272229. 2002.)



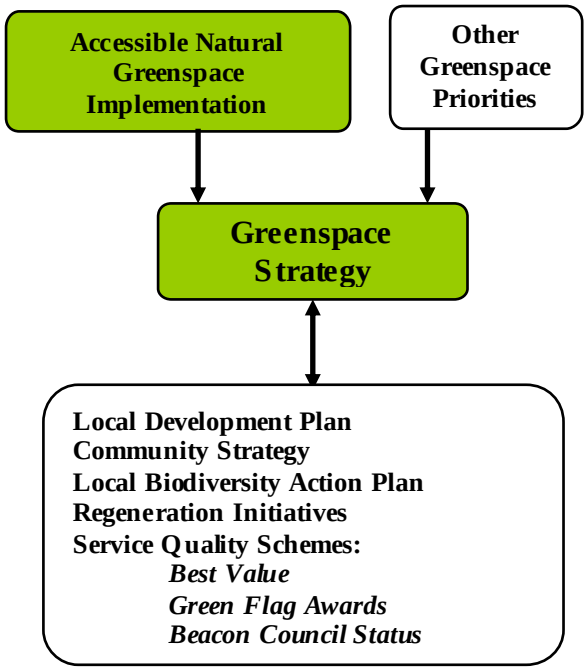
Greenspace Assessment: Developing the Policy and Management Response

It is for local authorities to determine local responses to areas with low provision. It is recognised that the scope for realistic progress from the identified current position towards that of the model will depend upon a range of factors unique to each local authority area. However English Nature considers it good practice for local authorities to undertake the following:

- to move towards full implementation of the principles of the model;
- to maintain and publish statistics and maps showing levels of provision;
- to set appropriate local targets for provision; and
- to take appropriate action to improve levels of provision in deficient areas and in order to meet the adopted targets.

Good practice in this respect would be policy developed in balance with the full range of local development, social and environmental priorities. The preferred mechanism for policy delivery would be by means of a local *Greenspace Strategy* that would set out the results of the implementation of the model and the policy response to it, in a manner fully integrated with other areas of policy, such as for formal town parks and playing fields. In turn the Greenspace Strategy should inform, and be informed by, other policy documents, such as the development plan, community strategy, nature conservation strategy and local biodiversity action plan (see Figure 10).

Figure 10. The role of the Greenspace Strategy



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;

- supplementary planning guidance could reflect general priorities for greenspace provision associated with certain significant classes of development. At present supplementary planning guidance tends to be produced in respect only of the provision of play space associated with new housing development (PPG3). This approach could potentially be extended to cover other greenspace functions (including *accessible natural greenspace*) and other types of development (such as industrial estates) involving significant areas of land; and
- the creative use of development briefs to set out greenspace requirements in respect of specific development sites, whether this is development of new greenspace of a particular type on a site, or the preservation of high quality greenspace (and the retention or development of access to it) within the development area.

Section 106 agreements can be utilised to ensure that greenspace elements are included within a development, or that compensatory provision is made in respect of lost greenspace and that commuted payments for greenspace maintenance are made by the developer.

Available tools: management approaches

There are three key means of using management approaches to support the implementation of the model:

- strategic management planning, e.g. by means of a greenspace strategy, to identify spatial priorities and set out targets for action;
- detailed management planning for individual sites which sets out the key purpose(s) of a greenspace and objectives for changing the character of areas over time from one type to another. In this way it might be possible to change, for instance, a little-used area of amenity grassland into a natural area through planned management action. Guidance on landscape management for this purpose is beyond the scope of this document, but some useful publications on this subject are listed in the bibliography; and
- the local authority could approach private, or institutional, landowners to develop management agreements for particularly valuable greenspaces. In this way public accessibility to land can be obtained and maintenance quality standards agreed.

Case study: Use of a Development Brief to Increase Provision

Trafford Metropolitan Borough Council designated a site of significant size on the urban fringe, sandwiched between residential areas and a motorway, for development as an employment site. Although a greenfield site, the land was poor quality farmland of marginal economic viability which was suffering damage from urban encroachment such as litter and vandalism.

In addition to setting standards for the general landscape and architectural design of the project, the development also required that a significant area of the land be developed as a country park, outlining the funding and management arrangements for its future sustainability.

This approach ensures that potential opportunities for the development of new sites can be set out well in advance and developed progressively as the associated development proposals progress.

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;
- developing 'pocket parks' where possible; and
- 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.

Accessible Natural Greenspace Quality

This guidance provides a method for assessing the quantity of accessible natural greenspace in an urban area and for taking action based on the results of that quantitative assessment. As such, the model is a strategic approach to the provision of accessible natural greenspace in urban areas. However, there is now also growing recognition of the importance of the quality of greenspace. A small, high quality space may be considered to be more attractive to the public than a large one of lesser quality.

In the same way that the model encourages continuous improvement of the *amount* of provision, continuous improvement in the *quality* of provision is also recommended. In order to recognise the higher value of good quality sites, local authorities might use site quality in addition to site size in determining the effective catchment zone that sites exert.

For simplicity, this guidance assumes that all greenspaces that qualify as natural and accessible can be treated as exerting equivalent catchment zones based on the size of the sites alone. As the model aims to recognise the value of greenspaces that provide access to nature for people, any consideration of quality would need to include the:

- perceptions of visitors as to the quality of natural experience offered;
- quality of the facilities related to visitor access; and
- of the performance of the site in ecological terms.

It is beyond the scope of this guidance to propose a mechanism for conducting such an assessment. However, it is possible to suggest potential means of addressing each of these three issues that might be adapted for the purpose. **User surveys** are a widely-used means of obtaining public views on many issues and could be readily applied to the question of the perception of the quality of natural experience offered by a greenspace. The quality of physical facilities for access could also be addressed through user survey, but is perhaps better covered by **expert inspection** using a tool such as the checklists provided in the *Visitor Welcome Initiative* (Countryside Agency, 1995) or other appropriate technical guidance. Ecological performance could be approached through **Phase I** habitat survey (which is strongly recommended as a source of basic data for a number of purposes) and assessed, using ecological expertise, in relation to the priorities set out in a **Local Biodiversity Action Plan**. In this way a measure of 'quality' for accessible natural greenspace could be arrived at and continuous improvement effectively planned and instituted in relation to the three key indicators.

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?** If so, it might be possible to improve accessibility, perhaps by building additional points of access around the perimeter of the site, by reducing the effect of physical access barriers (e.g. by building a footbridge over a road, river or railway that might otherwise act to discourage visitors) or by negotiating an appropriate management agreement with a private or institutional landowner to facilitate visitor access;
- **are there existing greenspace sites which lack natural areas or contain small natural areas that could be expanded?** If so, it might be possible to change the

management arrangements for part of these sites to create 'natural' areas large enough to be significant; and

- **is there the potential to create new accessible natural greenspace through development?** If so, then the local authority could work to facilitate this by producing supplementary planning guidance and development briefs for specific development sites and by following this up by actively using Section 106 agreements to secure the desired results.

In this way a range of possible actions can be identified, starting with the relatively straightforward improvements to access and moving through to more complex and long-term aims for the creation of new *accessible natural greenspace* in association with the development control system. By using this together with specified spatial priorities (such as areas of deficiency or green space networks) in planning future action, scarce resources can be deployed most effectively to achieve the best practical results.

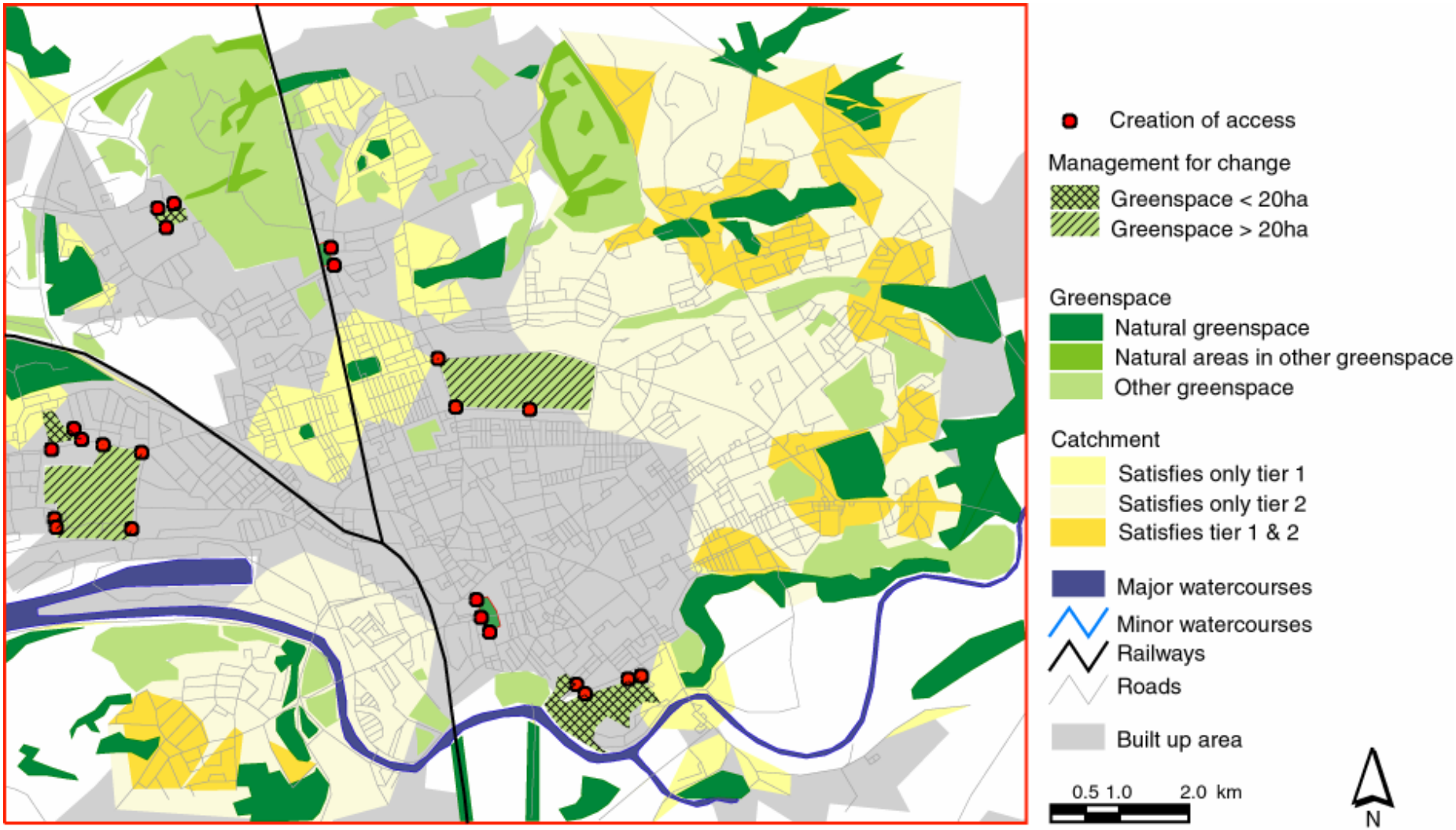
Case Study: The Greater Manchester Habitat Action Plan for Managed Green Space

The Greater Manchester Ecology Unit has produced a guide to help local authorities understand and enhance the biodiversity value of sites under management These include amenity grassland, private gardens, allotments, town parks, planted shrubberies, playing fields, grounds of buildings, churchyards and cemeteries.

The Action Plan specifies a number of notable species and defines the extent of the natural greenspace resource within Greater Manchester and estimates its existing biodiversity value. The various legal factors potentially affecting the protection of managed greenspace are covered and relevant current trends in policy and management of these sites are identified. A series of measurable and time-limited targets are set and actions are proposed to achieve them.

The document is brief and yet contains a wealth of information on enhancing the biodiversity value of managed greenspaces. In terms of ANGSt, the application of the Action Plan is likely to result in more managed greenspaces becoming multifunctional (i.e. offering both high amenity and biodiversity value) and meeting the criteria to qualify as accessible natural greenspace, thus improving provision and providing a useful potential means of addressing deficient areas by management action.

Figure 11. Options for action to improve natural greenspace provision



Examples of Actions to Increase Provision

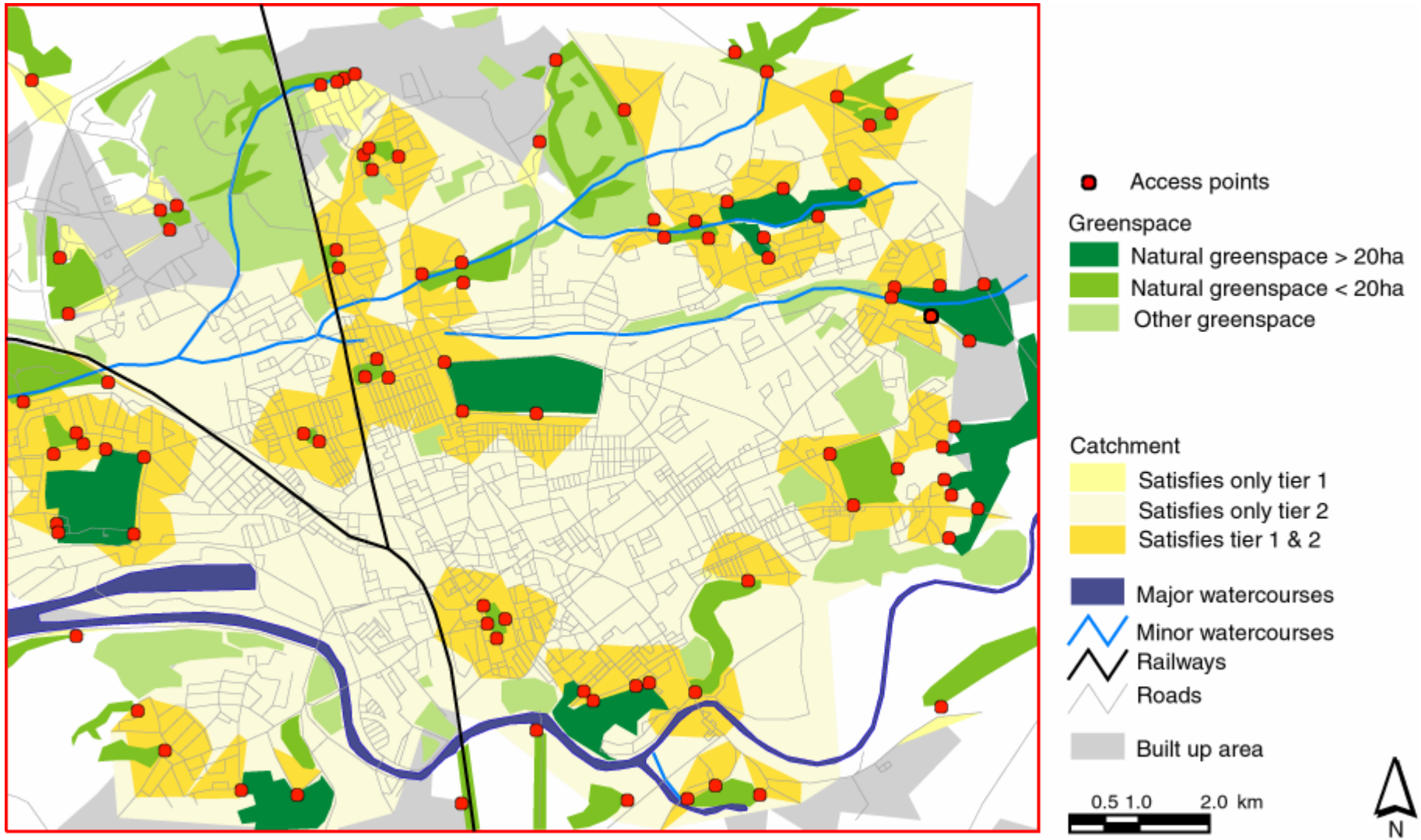
There are many ways of increasing the amount of acessible natural greenspace. High quality footpaths (top far left) and other facilities can enhance accessibility; creative managemnet can develop natural areas within formal parks (top left and centre) or on institutional grounds (top right); linear features (top far right and bottom right) such as derelict railway corridors and canals can be given natural features and used to connect greensapce networks together; new accessible natural greenspace can be created in association with large development projects such as business parks (bottom centre); and, in areas where no other action is immediately feasible, street greening (bottom left) can improve the natural quality of the urban form.







Figure 12. The positive impact of proposed actions from Figure 11



Conclusion

This guidance has presented local authorities with a practical method for implementing English Nature's 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 management practice and future policy in a way that is highly visual and readily understood.

The Importance of Creative Greenspace Management

The accessible natural greenspace model is an approach to promoting nature for the enjoyment of the people living in urban areas. Natural areas are mostly characterised by low management intensity, providing for natural areas should not be taken as an excuse to neglect the management of existing greenspaces. Natural greenspace requires the long term commitment to skilled management and greenspace managers have a vital role to play in developing the natural potential of the sites under their care and in achieving a high quality, truly *multifunctional*, greenspace resource for the benefit of local communities.

The Desirability of Holistic Greenspace Planning

The model does suggest yardsticks for the provision of natural greenspaces against which the performance of urban areas can be measured However accessible natural greenspace is only a part of the overall urban greenspace resource, and is often closely related and complementary to other types of greenspace.

This guidance has already suggested that the planning and management of accessible natural greenspace should be placed in the context of a wider urban greenspace strategy. In the future, to increase the sustainability of towns and cities, it may be necessary adopt even more holistic approaches to meet the challenge posed by the drive for urban densification. Urban forestry, the greenway concept and greenstructure planning are all developing approaches that take this view.

Better information is required on the overall urban greenspace resource and its functions, and of how the people living and working in urban areas perceive their greenspace. This will help the development of locally-appropriate standards for accessible natural greenspace provision and to expand it into other areas of greenspace planning.

New sources of data are being developed that may help local authorities. Methodological approaches have been developed, such as the mapping of the tree resource in urban units. Excellent aerial photography is available as a main information source and in the near future high resolution satellite imagery is likely to become available for mapping of urban greenspace.

On this basis, comprehensive approaches for planning such as the concept of urban forestry (i.e. the planning and management of the whole tree population in an urban area) can be adopted.

Support and Advice for Users of this Guidance

This guidance provides a brief discussion and summary of the model and the means of its implementation. It is not a comprehensive technical manual and from time-to-time detailed practical issues may arise that local authorities may need to seek specific advice to resolve. English Nature is committed to the continued support of the model and those that use it, and a range of information materials may be produced for this purpose. Training workshops might also be held in order to provide detailed support for implementers. Otherwise, advice about the model will be available from staff within English Nature's network of local teams.

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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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