

Newry, Mourne & Down Open Space Strategy



2025 - 2035

DRAFT

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CONTENTS

1.0 Newry, Mourne & Down Open Space Strategy

- 1.1 Purpose of the Strategy
- 1.2 Open Space Resource in the District
- 1.3 Policy Context
- 1.4 Investment in Parks
- 1.5 Benefits of Open Space

2.0 Vision for Open Space

- 2.1 Vision for Newry, Mourne and Down's Open Space
- 2.2 Strategic Principles & Aspirations

3.0 The District's Open Spaces

- 3.1 Newry, Mourne and Down Open Spaces

4.0 Open Space Provision

- 4.1 Open Space Standards
- 4.2 Quantity and Type of Open Space
- 4.3 Quality of Open Space
- 4.4 Open Space Accessibility

5.0 Action Plan

- 5.1 Introduction
- 5.2 The Open Space Action Plan

1.0 NEWRY, MOURNE & DOWN OPEN SPACE STRATEGY

1.1 Purpose of the Strategy

The Open Space and Outdoor Recreation Strategy for Newry, Mourne and Down (NMD) sets out the Council's approach to the protection, enhancement and management of open space in the council area. The vision for open space and outdoor recreation is supported by a series of priorities for NMD and partners over the next 10 years. The strategy will inform the Local Development Plan.

Understanding the role and function of Newry, Mourne and Down's open spaces, is key to the setting of priorities and local standards for provision. The strategy will enable the Council to make the most of its assets, identify deficiencies, secure new provision, improve quality through better accessibility and provide infrastructure to facilitate outdoor recreation. It focusses on NMD District Council owned and managed open space but takes cognisance of publicly accessible privately owned space.

A key purpose is to ensure that, at a strategic level, outdoor recreation operates in as sustainable way as possible, protecting the scenic and environmental value of the area, whilst building on the health and economic benefits it can bring.

1.2 Open Space Resource in the District

Newry, Mourne and Down district covers an area of 1,700 km², covering part of County Down and County Armagh, and has over 160 km of coastline including Strangford Lough, the Irish Sea and Carlingford Lough. The landscapes are amongst some of the most scenic in Ireland, including the dramatic mountain areas of the Ring of Gullion and the Mourne Mountains, towards the south and west of the council area. rugged volcanic peaks. To the west of Newry, the uplands of the Ring of Gullion are dramatic, rugged volcanic

peaks, with Slieve Gullion at the centre of the 'Ring'. Between the two mountain areas, the drumlin lowlands around Newry surround Carlingford Lough.



The district has a wide-ranging provision of open space in its 88 settlements. In addition, the district benefits from several country estates, forest parks, walking trails, greenways, beaches and activity centres all of which provide a range of outdoor recreational opportunities and attract large numbers of visitors every day. The Council owns and maintains a variety of open space, including parks, sports facilities, children's play areas, woodlands and amenity green space in housing developments. There are also privately owned playing fields and school sports facilities, which are well served by a wide range of private recreational clubs including, soccer, rugby, cricket, gaelic games and golf.

The Kingdom of Mourne is a unique landscape with drystone walls of rounded glacial boulders, a dramatic mountain backdrop, and extensive sea views. To the south, lies the Kilkeel Coast with its coastal strip, wetlands and mudflats. Slieve Roosley comprises an area of lower but still highly distinctive and dramatic hills to the north

west of the main chain of the Mourne Mountains. The Mourne Foothills immediately to the north of the mountains form a chain of small hills connecting the Mourne Mountains to rugged uplands of Slieve Croob to the northern part of the district.



By contrast, drumlin landscape to the north of Newcastle is characterised by river valleys flowing to the coast and the sand spits of Murlough Bank, and the Dundrum Inner Bay. To the east, the sandy coastline is broken by the rocky headlands of the Lecale Coast. This part of the former Down District has a special remote and historic character, with windswept farmland and numerous archaeological sites. Slieve Croob and the peaks of the Mourne Mountains provide a dramatic backdrop to views across these eastern lowlands and, together with the sea, provide a striking setting for Newcastle. Downpatrick is a historical focus to the east of the council area, sited at a bridging point of the Quoile River at the foot of the Lecale Hills. The towns of Ballynahinch, Crossgar

and Saintfield are set in a drumlin landscape, on the banks of a river and beside the wooded parkland landscape of local estates.



The 2021 Census indicated that the total population was 182,074. The 2011 Census data highlighted that 65% of the district's population (then 171,533) resided within the 88 designated settlements with 16% living in Newry City, 24% living in the towns, 20% within the villages and 5% within the 52 small settlements. The remaining 35% were living outside of the settlements in the open countryside. This emphasises the importance of good access to the country estates, forest parks, walking trails, greenways, beaches and activity centres, alongside good access to high quality open space in towns and villages.

1.3 Policy Context

Northern Ireland Regional Context

The **Regional Development Strategy 2035** aims to promote development which improves the health and wellbeing of communities. RG7 recognises the importance of promoting recreational space within cities, towns and neighbourhoods and new developments. It states that plans should make provision for adequate green and blue infrastructure. RG11 further promotes the protection and encouragement of green and blue infrastructure within urban areas. It also recognises built heritage is a key tourism and recreational asset.

One of the **Strategic Planning Policy Statement's** core planning principles includes improving health and wellbeing. It states that planning authorities should contribute positively to improving our health and wellbeing through safeguarding and facilitating quality open space, sport and outdoor recreation and through providing safe and secure age-friendly environments. The SPPS highlights the fact that well designed buildings and successful places can have a positive impact on how people feel. The way in which places and buildings are configured, patterns of movement in the space around us and the level of access to quality open space are all factors that can contribute to our general wellbeing.

The SPPS requires councils to bring forward an Open Space Strategy that must reflect the aims, objectives and policy approach of the SPPS, tailored to specific circumstances of the plan area. It also notes that the LDP should be informed by a survey / assessment of existing open space provision and future needs to include both public and private open space and identify the different needs they serve.

The SPPS and **PPS8** set the following regional strategic objectives for open space, sport and outdoor recreation:

- Safeguard existing open space and sites identified for future such provision;
- Ensure that areas of open space are provided as an integral part of new development and that appropriate arrangements are made for their management and maintenance in perpetuity;
- Facilitate appropriate outdoor recreational activities in the countryside;
- Ensure that new open space areas and sporting facilities are convenient and accessible for all sections of society, particularly children, older people and those with disabilities;
- Achieve high standards of siting, design and landscaping for all new open space areas and sporting facilities; and
- Ensure that the provision of new open space areas and sporting facilities is in keeping with the principles of environmental conservation and helps sustain and enhance biodiversity.

PPS 8: Open Space, Sport and Outdoor Recreation defines open space as “all open space of public value, including not just land, but also inland bodies of water such as rivers, canals, lakes and reservoirs which offer important opportunity for sports and outdoor recreation and can act as visual amenity.”

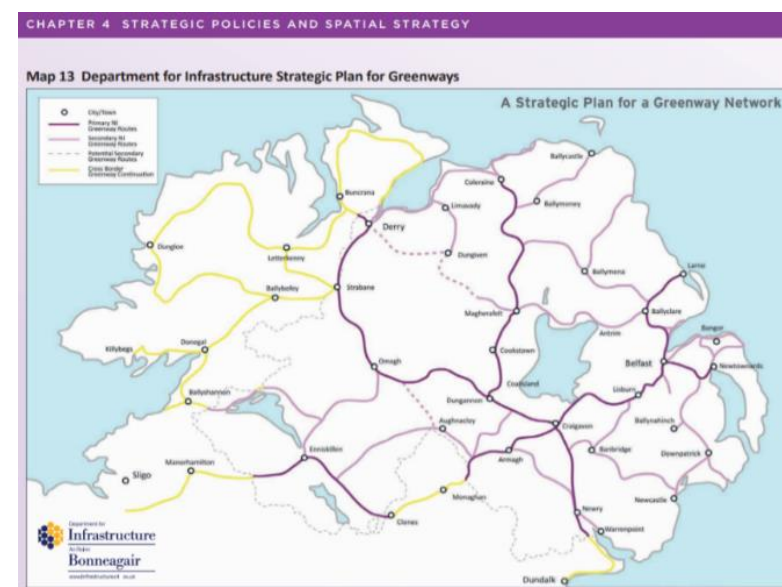
A wide range of other strategies and documents are relevant to open space, including those which have been produced by government departments and agencies and are listed below:

- Sports Matters: The Northern Ireland Strategy for Sport and Physical Recreation 2009-2019
- PFMDFM Play and Leisure Policy Statement for Northern Ireland
- Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety – Fitter Future for All 2012-2002
- Out Great Outdoors – Outdoor Recreation Action Plan for Northern Ireland – DCAL, DETI and DoE (now the Department for Communities) (2014)
- Sports Facility Strategy for Northern Ireland 2009-2019
- Active Places Research for 2009 Report and 2014 update
- Our Passion, Our Place – NIEA Strategic Priorities 2012 – 2022
- DARD – The Rural White Paper Action Plan (2012)
- Northern Ireland Changing Gear – A Bicycle Strategy for Northern Ireland 2015
- Active School Travel Initiative

The **Outdoor Recreation Action Plan for Northern Ireland**¹ highlights the importance of the countryside for recreation and acknowledges the contribution this can make to the rural economy and the promotion of tourism. The outdoor environment provides a resource that has potential for supporting the delivery of long-term social and economic transformation. The Strategy aims to deliver:

- Healthy active lifestyles for local people from all communities
- Economic growth through encouraging visitors to come and enjoy the outdoors
- Protection of landscapes and ecosystems for future generations

In 2016, the Department for Infrastructure developed **Exercise Explore Enjoy: A Strategic Plan for Greenways**, setting out a series of greenways in Northern Ireland as traffic-free routes connecting communities to all kinds of destinations for commuting, everyday journeys for leisure and recreation.



¹ Our Great Outdoors - the Outdoor Recreation Plan for Northern Ireland, Sport NI 2014

Local Policy Context

The importance of open space is recognised at a Council wide level through a number of its Plans and Strategies, which include the following key documents:

- NMD Corporate Plan 2024-2027
- 'Living Well Together' A Community Plan for Newry, Mourne and Down to 2030
- Emerging Local Development Plan
- Newry, Mourne and Down District Council Sports Facility Strategy, 2017
- Sports Facilities Strategy- Multi Sports Hub Review Strategic Recommendations, June 2022
- Play Strategy Impact Review and Assessment of Current Need 2024 - 2029, Playboard NI
- Newry, Mourne and Down Active Travel Masterplan, Sustrans 2020

The District Electoral Area Fora across Newry, Mourne and Down area as follows:

- Crotlieve
- Downpatrick
- Newry
- Rowallane
- Slieve Croob
- Slieve Gullion
- The Mournes



1.4 Investment in Parks

The Council continues to invest in its parks and open spaces to protect our environment, improve biodiversity and make Ards and North Down an attractive place to live in and visit. Recent initiatives include:

- Castlewellan Forest Park- NLFH funded project
- Albert Basin - The Newry Park
- The Greenways Network
- Downpatrick Skate Park and Pump Track
- Mourne Mountains Gateway Project
- Mourne Mountains Gateway
- Castle Park Redevelopment Project



1.5 Benefits of Open Space

The Council recognises that good quality and easily accessible open space can contribute to a better quality of life. It plays an important role in contributing to the wellbeing, physical and mental health and quality of life of the population. Good quality open space supports many cultural, social, economic, health and environmental benefits and has become increasingly important during the recent world wide pandemic.



The importance of safe accessible and well-connected green spaces for improving quality of life have never been more pertinent and some of the benefits include the following:

- Mitigates against climate change
- Improves physical properties of open space
- Better mental health and well being
- Better physical health
- Creating a stronger society
- Increasing economic value
- Moving towards a sustainable urban environment

The importance of open space is recognised within the Districts Corporate Plan, advocating a healthy and sustainable district which will provide better environmental and social outcomes for all. One of the key aims of the Community Plan² is to improve the wellbeing of people in the district. Future planning policies should take account of the need to:

- Provide opportunities for and encourage healthy lifestyles and physical activity
- Create open space with public access
- Improve ability to reach schools and workplaces by active travel



Open space provision is particularly relevant to 3 of the 5 key priorities / outcomes outlined within the Community Plan including: enjoyment of resident's good health and well being, benefiting from a clean, quality and sustainable environment and that all residents live in respectful, safe and vibrant communities. The Community Plan's thematic group for the environment and spatial development seeks to increase the promotion of both green and blue infrastructure and to promote and enhance access to the built and natural environmental assets. The Plan also seeks to better utilise community planning partners estates to create more green space which is open and accessible to all.

The **vision of the Community Plan** is to create a district which "is a place with strong safe and vibrant communities where everyone has a good quality of life and access to opportunities, choices and high-quality services which are sustainable, accessible and meet people's needs."



² Newry, Mourne & Down Community Plan 2030 'Living Well Together'

Outdoor recreation has a very broad range of benefits and spans many social, economic and environmental fields, as the diagram below highlights³.



Open space, particularly the natural resources in the district, are important contributors to the character and appearance of the landscape. This natural resource encourages people to visit, live, work and invest in the district and as such can make a valuable contribution to the local economy. This is perhaps best demonstrated by the success of the activity tourism industry in the district, which benefits from the variety of open space assets available for outdoor recreation.



The provision of open space also has important benefits in terms of the environment. It provides for various habitats and species (many of which are protected and of local, national and international importance) and includes many of our natural features that make our landscape so distinctive. Within urban areas it also provides green lungs, visual breaks, opportunities for recreation and wildlife habitats.

³ The Outdoor Recreation Action Plan for Northern Ireland, Sport NI

2.0 VISION FOR OPEN SPACE

2.1 Vision for Newry, Mourne and Down's Open Space

The Council recognises that good quality and easily accessible open space can contribute to a better quality of life. Open spaces contribute to a range of national and local commitments and policies, such as sustainable development, climate change adaptation, carbon management, outdoor learning, healthy living, sustainable transport, biodiversity and social equity.

The vision for open space is built upon the council Corporate Plan and the Community Plan: Living Well Together and will help deliver the Plan Objectives in relation to Open Space, and will improve the wellbeing of people in the district.



The Council recognises that the provision of open space plays an important role in contributing to the wellbeing, physical and mental health and quality of life of our population. Open spaces contribute to a range of national and local commitments and policies, such as sustainable development, climate change adaptation, carbon management, outdoor learning, healthy living, sustainable transport, biodiversity and social equity.

The Open Space Strategy Vision is that...

“The quality of life of the residents and visitors of Newry, Mourne and Down will be enhanced by access to a well-connected network of clean, high-quality and sustainable open spaces, forest parks and natural places close to where they live. Open spaces play an important role in contributing to the health and wellbeing of local communities, providing spaces for learning, socialising, playing and active sports.

The wealth of natural resources and scenic landscapes will encourage people to visit, live, work and invest in the district. The woodlands, forest parks, beaches and historic parks & gardens, provide places for outdoor recreation, activity tourism and encourage healthy lifestyles.

Urban and rural green and blue networks will be protected and enhanced to diversify habitats, managed sustainably to help mitigate climate change. Where possible, open spaces will be linked to the Strategic Greenways by a network of local paths and green corridors to encourage active travel, promote active lifestyles and exploration of the outdoors.”

2.2 Strategic Principles & Aspirations

Evidence suggests that well designed, high quality open spaces are vital in creating healthy and liveable cities, towns and villages. It is recognised that a shared, strategic approach to open space maximises its potential to contribute to a more inclusive and sustainable future.

To ensure that open spaces are fit for the future, 6 guiding principles have been set to help achieve the vision for open space:

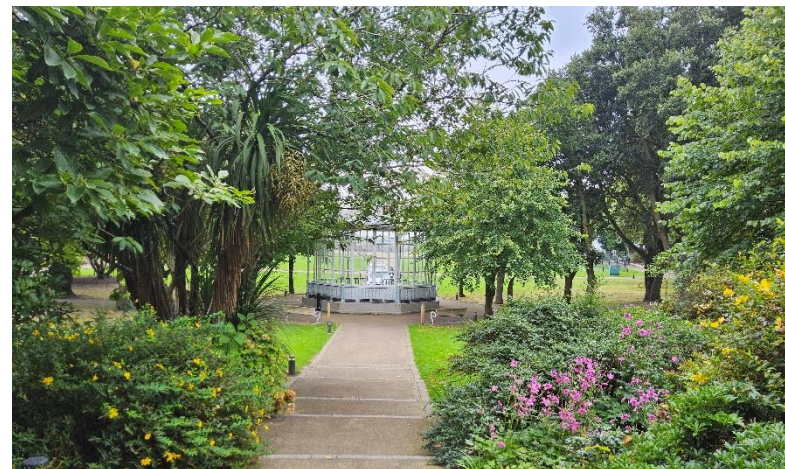
1. Safeguard open space and sites identified for future provision, recognising its role in improving people's health and wellbeing.

Open spaces can provide platforms for community activities, social interaction and physical recreation, as well as reducing social isolation, improving community relations and positively affecting the wider determinants of health. The provision of a range of parks, amenity spaces and natural places provide opportunities for socialising, children's play, participation in sport and enjoyment of the natural environment.



2. Provide high quality, well-managed, clean, and safe open spaces close to where people live, that meet the needs of people of all ages, abilities and backgrounds.

Everyone living in the towns and villages of NMDDC should have access to well designed, useable, clean, safe and accessible spaces are vital to encouraging healthier lifestyles and tackling inequality. Good quality open spaces lead to higher satisfaction levels, greater feelings of safety and higher levels of activity in the outdoors.



3. Provide exciting, active and inclusive places for play and outdoor recreation in both equipped and natural settings.

Everyone living in the towns and villages of NMDDC should have access to attractive, good quality open space, providing opportunities for a wide range of users and abilities, close to where they live.

4. Promote opportunities for sustainable travel through greater connectivity of open spaces and Greenways, helping to promote active lifestyles.

Better connected places (e.g. strategic greenways) support walking, cycling and public transport use. Promote opportunities for sustainable travel through development of active travel networks to lead to healthier more active lifestyles by reducing the need to travel by private car.



5. Facilitate access to appropriate outdoor recreational activities in the district's woodlands, forest parks and historic parks & gardens.

The benefits of well managed open spaces are extensive, providing attractive and diverse places for recreation and enjoyment of the outdoors, whilst helping mitigate and adapt to climate change.



6. Protect and enhance the natural environment, helping to improve climate resilience and help create a more sustainable environment.

The special landscape qualities of the area's towns, countryside and coastline will be protected and enhanced, to strengthen a connected network of diverse woodlands and open spaces, helping to enhance biodiversity and sustain ecological habitats.



3.0 THE DISTRICT'S OPEN SPACES

3.1 Newry Mourne and Down Open Spaces

Newry, Mourne and Down is abundant with a beautiful natural environment and open spaces with many walking and cycling trails. It has numerous forests, parks, and open space as well as 3 Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

The area has a wide diversity of public open spaces including woodlands, beaches, parks, allotment gardens, wildlife sites, burns and ponds. Many open spaces are multi-functional and contribute to the quality of life in the district, by providing opportunities for active and passive recreation, an attractive and sustainable urban environment and a space for nature. The open spaces vary considerably in size from Country Parks / Forest Parks of over 400ha in size to small local greenspaces of less than 100m². Whilst the large parks provide day trip locations, the smaller parks and amenity open spaces also make a valuable contribution to accessible local provision.

Open space may serve a range of functions and some areas, particularly informal spaces, may not fit neatly into the typology.

The Planning Policy Statement 8: Open Space, Sport and Outdoor Recreation defines open space as:

“all open space of public value...including not just land, but also inland bodies of water such as rivers, canals, lakes and reservoirs which offer important opportunity for sports and outdoor recreation and can also act as visual amenity.”

The map extract illustrates how the open space resource has been mapped in Geographical Information Systems (GIS), each site has been allocated an identification reference and a typology.



The Council owns and maintains a large variety of open space, sport and outdoor recreational areas throughout the district. There are also privately owned playing fields and other areas of open space including playing fields in the education sector, woodlands, parks and amenity green space including those located within housing developments.

Parks and Gardens

The Council area is well served in terms of parks and gardens, which are dispersed throughout the towns and villages. There are also privately owned areas of open space including private playing fields in sports clubs and the education sector and grassland areas, glens, parks, walkways and amenity green space located within areas of housing. There are a variety of parks of varying sizes and facilities including the following:

- **Historic Park / Garden & Demesnes / Forest Park / Regional Scenic Area / Country Park:** Areas of parkland of significant size, offering a combination of recreation / visitor facilities and heritage features. National Trust property, private estates, Country Parks, Woodland Trust sites and Forest Parks, which are accessible and open to the public. Major leisure facility, with a range of visitor facilities and a wide catchment of users, often travelling long distances by car and or public transport for a 'family day out'.
- **City Park / Town Parks:** Open spaces that provide a variety of activities and natural features, including sports facilities, children's play for all ages, informal recreation, gardens and seating areas. City parks located in Newry and Downpatrick, will provide facilities appropriate to the main hub settlements. Town Parks will provide facilities appropriate to towns (e.g.

Newcastle and Ballynahinch) or peripheral residential areas of the City or main town.

- **Local Parks:** These parks are small areas of open space, and may contain children's play, seating or informal recreation. They are often well used parks within walking distance of the immediate residential area.



Outdoor Sports Facilities

Newry, Mourne and Down District Council owns and maintains a large variety of open space, sport and outdoor recreational areas throughout the council area, including playing fields, football pitches, tennis courts and bowling greens etc. Some GAC sites include play facilities that are open at times when the sports facility is closed. The overall provision and distribution of sports facilities is assessed in the Sports Strategy

Amenity Space

These are landscaped areas providing visual amenity or separating

different buildings or land uses including informal recreation spaces, communal green spaces in and around housing, and village greens, most commonly, but not exclusively in housing areas.

Equipped / Designated Play Areas

Throughout the Council area there are a number of children's outdoor play areas. The majority of these are located within the towns and villages and includes local playgrounds and equipped playgrounds. The overall provision and distribution of children's equipped play areas by NMDDC is assessed in the Play Strategy.



Green Corridors and Greenways

These open spaces include promenades and paths alongside rivers, disused railways, nature conservation areas, amenity footpaths and other routes. They provide opportunities for informal recreation, walking and cycling whilst also providing a valuable green corridor for wildlife. They include Greenways / active travel corridors (existing and proposed) that enable people to move safely between open spaces, to destinations in the urban areas and out to the countryside.

Natural and Semi-Natural Urban Green Spaces

Areas of undeveloped or previously developed land with residual natural habitats or which have been planted or colonised by vegetation and wildlife, including woodlands, urban forestry, grasslands (e.g. meadows), wetlands, open and running water and accessible beaches.



Other Open Space

Allotments, community gardens and growing spaces, cemeteries and civic spaces are also included in the typology of open space but have not been included in the Strategy assessment. There are a number of community gardens in the district.

The countryside can provide a wide variety of recreational facilities to meet the increase in demand for outdoor recreation. The many natural resources in the area include: the hills, Country Parks and Forests Parks provide a wealth of opportunities for outdoor pursuits and recreational activities including walking, cycling, horse riding and climbing.

4.0 OPEN SPACE PROVISION

4.1 Open Space Standards

This section summarises the district's current open space network, analysing the different types of open spaces, quality and distribution. Open space provision is measured against UK best practice standards creating usable outputs and the development of a tool for future open space management.

The results are captured in a database of open spaces, compiled using spatial data from the Open Space Audit, with additional information from NMDDC information for outdoor sports facilities and play provision.

4.2 Quantity and Type of Open Space

An appreciation of the hierarchy of open spaces can help councils to understand the different functions they perform and distinguish between spaces of strategic, local and neighbourhood importance. This should be tailored to fit local circumstances, and is usually most applicable to parks, greenspaces and woodland areas. Criteria linking population catchments to the size of different spaces and sensible distance or time thresholds can be included, helping to ensure that spaces of different types, functions and sizes are easily accessible to the communities they serve.

A typology has been developed to assist understanding of the breadth of the open space resource in the district, each having a variety of uses and secondary uses / characteristics. Each open space audit site has been assigned an identification reference, a name, location, typology and type, as set out in the table. A GIS shape file was prepared for the open spaces included in the audit, to which the site survey data was attached.

The Newry, Mourne and Down district contains **10,577.34 hectares of open space** (excluding indoor sports facilities). The following table sets out the amounts of the various types of open space included in the Open Space Audit (all open space sites).

Table 1: Open Space Quantity

Open Space Type	Area (hectares)
Parks and gardens	9146.30
Amenity space	76.49
Outdoor sports facilities	855.60
Play Areas	27.37
Community Greenways	10.50
Natural and semi natural urban greenspaces	459.96
Allotments	0.25
Civic spaces	0.87
Total Open Space	10,577.34 hectares

(Refer to the Technical Report for more information.)

The existing provision of open space in the plan area has been assessed against the National Playing Field Association (NPFA) recommended minimum standard (commonly referred to as the '6 acre standard'). This is a national standard which recommends a **minimum of 2.4 hectares of outdoor playing space per 1000 population**. This is commonly referred to as the 'Six Acre Standard', comprising of 4 acres (1.6 hectares per 1000 population) for outdoor sport provision and 2 acres (0.8 hectares per 1000 population) for children's play. This has been renamed as the Fields in Trust (FiT) Standard⁴.

The Benchmarks enable calculations to be made on the quantity and accessibility of open space, outdoor sports and play spaces as possible.



⁴ <https://fieldsintrust.org/content/images/FIT-Standards-2024-Accessible-version.pdf>

Table 2: NMDDC Open Space Provision

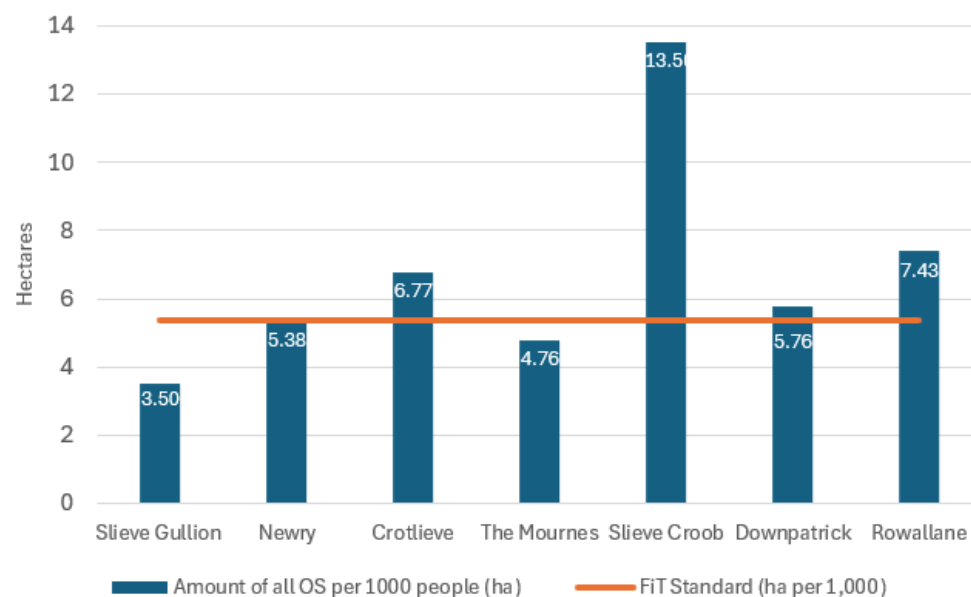
Benchmark Category	FiT Standard per 1000 people (ha)	NMDDC Total (ha)	NMDDC per 1000 people (ha) ⁵
Parks and gardens	0.8	91.71	0.52
Amenity green space	0.6	76.49	0.43
Sports pitches (excl. School pitches)	1.2	432.02	2.46
Other outdoor sports (courts, greens, tracks, trails or sports equipment)	0.4	19.98	0.11
Equipped play areas	0.25	27.37	0.16
Informal play provision (incl. MUGAs, pump tracks or skateboard parks)	0.3	47.95	0.27
Natural and semi natural greenspace	1.8	459.96	2.61
TOTAL	5.35 ha	11,769.36 ha	6.57ha

When assessed against the FiT standards, the audit identified that the total open space in the Newry, Mourne and Down area meets the standards. The NMDDC quantity standards requires there to be 5.35 hectares of open space per 1,000 people and the overall figure is 6.57 hectares of open space per 1,000 people which exceeds the standard.

⁵ Population of the District approximately 175,974 people (2015 estimate)

Furthermore, the district includes a number of large forest parks / country parks, some of which are located close to the towns and villages, including: Kilbroney Forest Park, Slieve Gullion, Delamont Country Park, Castlewellan Castle, Tollymore Forest Park and Mourne Park. The combined total area of these large scale parks is 3,505.76 hectares, so they have been removed from the calculation. Some are suitable for a day out visit, whereas others located closer to settlements can be enjoyed for shorter walks and cycle rides.

The chart demonstrates the open space provision in each DEA area, when compared with the FIT standard of 5.35ha per 1,000 people. (Note: The large Country Parks / Forest Parks / golf courses / private estates that are at a distance from the settlements have been omitted from the assessment).



The chart demonstrates that the Slieve Gullion DEA area falls below the Fields in Trust quantity standard with regard to total amount of open space in the settlements. The Mourne DEA also falls just below the quantity standard. However, the settlements in these areas are set within attractive landscapes with access to the countryside and large Forest Parks (Slieve Gullion Forest Park, the Mourne Mountains, Tollymore forest Park and Mourne Park).

Beaches are not included within the definition of Open Space as set out in PPS8. These open spaces have not been captured in the open space audit database but are often publicly accessible and provide a wealth of opportunities for active outdoor pursuits such as walking, sailing, angling, children's play and cycling. However, the open space audit will consider the accessible beaches along the coastline, which are within easy reach of the settlements. *To be completed.*



4.3 Quality of Open Space

It is not only important to know how much open space there is in the district, but also to understand the quality of that open space. Quality is a key component of open space. Open spaces need to be of a good quality to provide communities a level of service and functional provision to meet informal leisure and recreational needs.

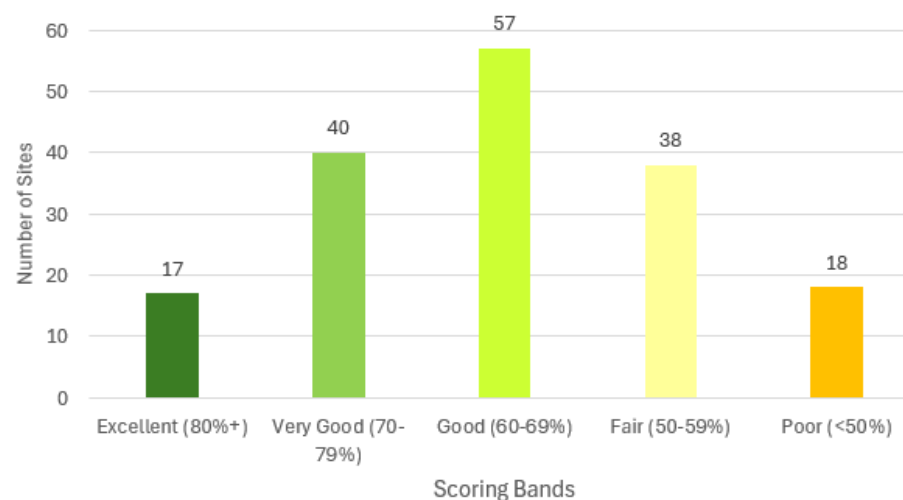
The quality assessment was based on the recommendations included in the “Greenspace Quality: A Guide to Assessment, Planning and Strategic Development”⁶.

The towns and villages currently enjoy mostly good provision of open space, ranging from a wide range of well equipped parks and gardens, sports facilities, woodlands and semi-natural spaces.

The quality of the 170No. selected open spaces has been analysed and the evaluation of the physical quality and the ‘fitness for purpose’ assessment findings have been set out in a settlement and DEA basis to review any trends, priority areas or issues.

The chart illustrates that of the open spaces included in the quality assessment, the majority of the assessed sites are in good condition, with only 18 in a “poor condition”. There is opportunity to improve the quality of these sites, and to improve the quality of some of the lower quality parks and amenity greenspaces.

Newry and Slieve Gullion DEAs have the lowest overall average quality scores. The Mourne DEA has the highest average quality score. The average quality score for all 170No. sites is 65%.



⁶ Greenspace Quality: A Guide to Assessment, Planning and Strategic Development” (2008), Greenspace Scotland

4.4 Open Space Accessibility

Access is a key component of open space. Open spaces need to serve local communities and deliver locally accessible open space providing a local resource that addresses daily needs, supports access by walking, cycling, horse riding and public transport, supports unsupervised use with safe accessibility and promotes informal recreation and exercise (dog walking, health walking or general passive use).

The accessibility standard refers to how close people should be to their nearest publicly usable open space. It requires assessment using straight line distance thresholds for particular types of open space. Distance thresholds are a useful planning tool. It is possible to map households within a distance threshold comparison of sites, neighbourhoods and community settlements.

Distances set the maximum distance that typical users can reasonably be expected to travel on foot to each type of open space. International research into the impacts of greenspace on health and on wider quality of life shows that having greenspace within a 5 minute walk of home is a strong indicator for health and quality of life benefits. A five minute walk is widely considered to equate to a distance of 400 metres 'door to space'.

The open spaces included in the Audit were mapped and the following accessibility standards applied:

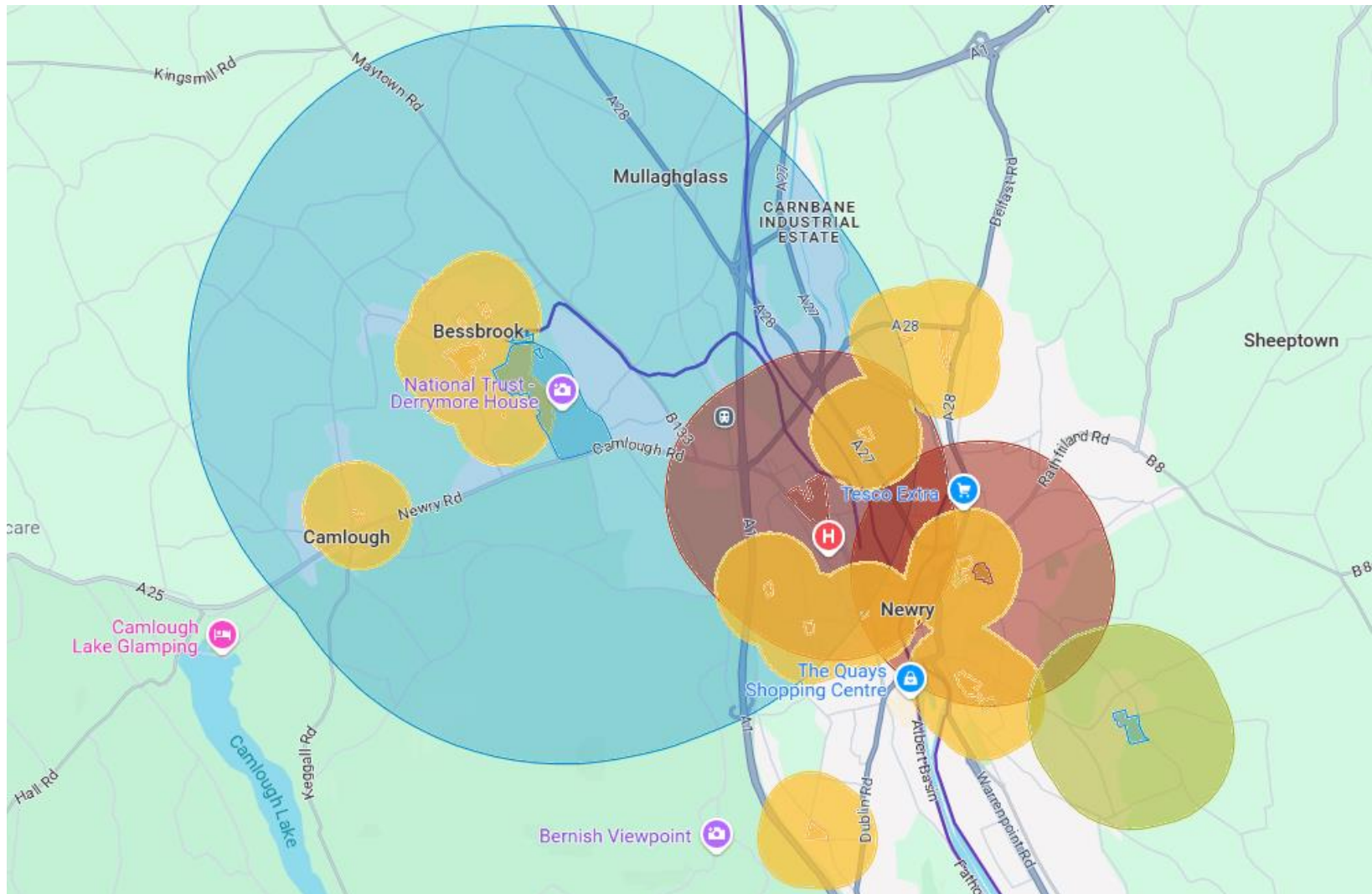
Table 3: Open Space Accessibility Standards

Open Space Type	Accessibility Standard
Historic Park / Garden & Demesnes / Forest Park / Regional Scenic Area / Country Park	2.5km walking catchment* (approx. 35 minute walk)
City / Town Park	1,000m walking catchment* (approx. 12 minute walk)
GAC Facility with Play Space	700m walking catchment* (approx. 8 minute walk) where there are no parks
Local Park	400m walking catchment* (approx. 5 minute walk)

* Straight line distance

The parks were mapped and the accessibility standards applied, with the catchments drawn to illustrate the accessibility of the communities to the various types of open space. The Technical Report provides a detailed assessment of the open space resource for each of the larger settlements included in the open space audit.

An example of the mapping is included below:



Accessibility Map for Newry (draft)

The accessibility assessment concluded the following:

	Settlement	Accessibility Assessment	Meets the Standard
Hub	Downpatrick	Downpatrick has 5 local parks within the settlement boundary, and no town parks. There are a number of Heritage / Country / Forest Parks in the wider countryside, but none within easy walking or cycling distance of the town. The residential areas on the periphery of the town that are not within 400m of a local park. Therefore, there is a need to upgrade an existing open space to provide a town park, which provides a range of open space, play and recreation facilities for all ages and abilities (e.g. Dunleath Park).	No
	Newry	There are 2 Cown Parks in Newry, which are centrally located. There are also 9 local parks distributed across the town. However, the residential area to the north east of the town is not within 400m of a Local Park or 1000m of a Cown Park. Currently, the residential area to the south west of the city is not within easy reach of a City Park or a Local Park. However, the proposal for a 15 Acre park to be created at the Albert Basin which will provide access to high quality open space facilities located close to the city centre.	No
Town	Ballynahinch	The town has a Town Park and 2 Local Parks, which provide easy access to open space facilities from all residential areas in the town.	Yes
	Castlewellan	Castlewellan does not contain any town or local parks, but has access to an extensive area of open space at Castlewellan Forest Park, located to the north of the town. Bunkers Hill also provides an area of semi-natural space for informal recreation and play opportunities.	No
	Crossmaglen	There are 2 Local Parks in Crossmaglen. The majority of residential areas are within 400m of the parks.	Yes
	Kilkeel	There are 1 Town Park and 3 Local Parks in Crossmaglen. The majority of residential areas are within easy distance of the parks apart from the residential areas on the northern periphery. The location of the town park along the coastline provides access along the coastline.	Yes
	Killyleagh	The town has 1 local park. The residential areas to the south west of the town centre do not have easy access to the park.	No
	Newcastle	The town of Newcastle contains 3 large Town Parks, providing a wide range of open space, sports, recreation and play opportunities for all ages. There is good access to the beach, which provides a linear open space along the eastern edge of the town, accessed along an attractive promenade. Access to Tollymore Forest Park is within reach of the town, as are the path to Slieve Donard.	Yes
	Saintfield	There is 1 centrally located Local Park in Saintfield. However, the peripheral areas of the town are not located within 400m of the park.	No
	Warrenpoint / Burren	Warrenpoint contains 1 Town Park and 1 local park and all residential areas are within easy distance of the parks. There is 1 Local Park in Burren and the residential area to the south of the park are not within 400m of the park	Yes

Table 4: Open Space Accessibility Assessment

5.0 ACTION PLAN

5.1 Introduction

The Open Space Audit has been used to inform the Action Plan recommendations and will inform area-based working, prioritisation and planning.

Action Plan identifies the open spaces needing upgrades through a combined analysis of the following:

- Quantity analysis – an overall look at the quantity of open space provision to identify areas that significantly fall below the quantity standard. It can be difficult to create new open space, but sites can be identified for upgrading to address quality issues / add function to existing sites.
- Quality analysis – site visits and quality scoring across a wide range of types of open space that can identify particularly poor quality sites
- Accessibility analysis – mapping according to an agreed set of standards that identifies any residential areas without good access to the various types of open space (usually the parks hierarchy). The Play Strategy has assessed the play resource in this way.
- Site specific proposals for projects, community group aspirations, access projects, other departmental projects, funding opportunities, or other Partner ownership of specific sites etc. informed by internal Council departments.
- External consultation, reflecting stakeholder and community aspirations that may confirm the Action Plan and suggest new projects.

The Action Plan will be reviewed on a regular basis, identifying the tasks required for implementation of the Strategy, in conjunction with Service Plans and the Community Plan.

5.2 The Open Space Action Plan

The Action Plan will be developed in discussion with the NMDDC Officers and in consultation with other stakeholders. The Action Plan will set out the recommendations that have been identified from the Open Space Audit Mapping and Assessment, and agreed through consultation with NMDDC Officers and other stakeholders.