

**Nordic Cities: Green, Resilient, Healthy**

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***Fostering national policies and initiatives for urban green space***

**4th Draft for the Working Group on Sustainable Cities, Nordic Council of Ministers**

*Prepared by Prof. Dr Cecil Konijnendijk*

*Nature Based Solutions Institute (*[*http://nbsi.eu*](http://nbsi.eu)*)*

Updated version, October 2021

**Highlights**

* From city parks to urban woodland and waterfronts, and from green schoolyards to community gardens, urban green space is crucial for vibrant, resilient, and healthy Nordic cities, especially for climate adaptation and mitigation, health promotion, biodiversity conservation and restoration.
* Green spaces should be considered part of critical infrastructure, assets essential for the functioning of societies and economies.
* Nordic cities have a long history of striving to be green and sustainable but urban green space and the benefits it provides need to be strengthened further.
* To develop the Nordic Green City of the Future, urban green space needs to meet the principles of Proximity, Diversity, Connectivity, and Equity. These principles can be translated into specific guidelines to inform policy, planning, design, and management.
* Further national policy and guidance and knowledge sharing are needed to assist cities in developing and implementing stronger urban green space programs and strategies.

**Scope**

As the Nordic countries, like other parts of the world, face a climate emergency, biodiversity loss, and public health challenges (most recently the global COVID-19 pandemic), increasing focus is on the places where most of us live: cities. The need to develop urban environments that are healthy and resilient, and where individuals and communities can thrive, is increasingly recognised by policy makers. At the global level, several Sustainable Development Goals link to the importance of healthy and green living environments, with Sustainable Development Goal number 11 specifically addressing cities and calling for universal access to urban green space. Urban ecosystems are a focus area of the new UN Decade of Restoration as well. At the European level, cities are recognised as key deliverers of climate objectives and the EU Green Deal’s call for carbon neutral economies. One of the key mechanisms is to expand natural carbon sinks. The EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 is one of the latest documents that stressed the need for greener cities. The EU Forestry Strategy calls for the planting of an additional 3 billion trees, including in and near urban areas. The New European Bauhaus (2021), which calls for beautiful, sustainable, and inclusive forms of living, as well as its specific Nordic adaptation through a process of co-design, also provide an important international framework. The Nordic Vision 2030 links up to these initiatives, reaffirming the Nordic Countries’ global leadership in sustainable urban development:

*The Nordic Region will become the most sustainable and integrated region in the world.*

In this context, this policy brief addresses why urban green spaces (which are considered here as including blue spaces as well) are essential for Nordic cities and citizens. It discusses what types of initiatives and actions can be taken to enhance these spaces and the benefits they provide and sets out directions for initiatives at the national level, as a way of linking international commitments to local level delivery specific to a Nordic context. This brief has policy makers at the national level as the key target group, but also links to the work of decision makers and other stakeholders at the regional and especially the local level. Greater collaboration across governmental levels, between sectors, as well as in partnership with other stakeholders, will enhance the development of the future Nordic green city.

**Essential Urban Green Space**

The many essential benefits and ecosystem services provided by urban green spaces have become widely recognised, and the past years have seen a rapid increase in research and evidence. Among the many important contributions of urban green space are, for example, beautifying our urban settings, ensuring daily contact with nature, and building attachment to local environments. Three areas of green space benefits should be particularly highlighted:

* Helping urban communities with climate change adaptation and mitigation, for example by cooling, reducing stormwater issues, and serving as carbon sinks and storage.
* Promoting public health and wellbeing, by offering environments that inspire, reduce stress, and give us the chance to restore ourselves, enhance physical activity, and stimulate social interactions. The COVID-19 pandemic has put further emphasis on these essential roles.
* Harbouring important biodiversity – urban green spaces can sometimes even host richer flora and fauna than areas outside cities.

The above benefits have become well documented and more has also become known about the reasons behind the benefits. We know, for example, that urban tree canopy is essential for shading and cooling, and that proximity and visibility of trees and other vegetation enhances our mental wellbeing. A diverse range of green spaces, with rich vegetation and landscape structures, can host high levels of biodiversity. Having public green spaces within easy reach will make us more inclined to visit these spaces regularly, thus making positive contributions to our physical and mental health while also enhancing social interactions.

Also important are the economic benefits related to the above (e.g., avoided cost of climate change adaptation and mitigation and healthcare), as well as to for example, the contributions green spaces can make to the local economy through tourism, creating business opportunities, and attracting investments.

From the above relationships specific targets and indicators can be derived that can inform policy. An example of this is the 3-30-300 guideline for urban greening which was recently introduced by experts based on research on the health and climate adaptation benefits of urban green space. The guideline calls for every urban resident having a view of at least 3 trees, living in a neighbourhood with at least 30% canopy cover, and being able to access a public green space within 300 metres from their residence.

**Vision for the Nordic Green City of the Future**

The Nordic countries and cities pride themselves on their environmental and sustainability policies which are often viewed as international examples. Many people across the world know about, for example, Copenhagen’s Finger Plan, the National Urban Parks of Finland and Sweden, and Oslo’s green infrastructure planning. When further developing Nordic Green Cities that are not only green, but also resilient, healthy, and competitive, the following key principles should be applied:

**Proximity:** Public green space should be within easy reach, e.g., not more than a 5-10 minutes’ walk away, as recommended by the World Health Organization. This will increase the regular use of these spaces, and with this come important health benefits. To ensure proximity, cities need to have dense green networks, with an evenly distributed urban tree canopy cover that provides essential climate adaptation, public health, and other benefits. Studies have shown that a canopy cover of 30-40% at the neigbourhood level results in major health gains and cooling impacts. Proximity also relates to visibility, as recent research has demonstrated the crucial importance of being able to see trees and other vegetation from our homes, places of work, and schools. Visual access to trees and other greenery, for example from our windows, strengthens our mental health, ability to focus, and creativity increase. The 3-30-300 guideline mentioned above can help guide and benchmark urban greening programs.

**Diversity:** Cities need a mix of green spaces, from larger natural areas to neighbourhood parks, and from green schoolyards to community gardens to green roofs and walls. These allow for a range of different uses and experiences Diversity also relates to offering a variety of landscapes within green space, the importance of enhancing biodiversity, and of developing a diverse urban tree population. It also ensures that green spaces provide a diverse range of ecosystem services. Diversity of green spaces and the experiences and benefits they offer places emphasis on quality and appropriate planning, design, and management.

**Connectivity:** Cities need to have well-connected green networks, linking up different green spaces, and providing safe, green corridors between them. Connectivity enhances recreational use, but also benefits flora and fauna. Connectivity helps build resilience and leads to better functioning urban ecosystems that provide a wide range of ecosystem services. This also relates to the importance of connecting urban green structures with surrounding natural areas and countryside, which allows for better linking for urban and rural areas.

**Equity:** All residents should have physical and visible access to green space, which means that a city’s green infrastructure needs to be evenly distributed over the city. This also relates to good accessibility. Unbalanced greening can have negative side-effects, such as the possibility of green gentrification or even segregation.Everybody should be able to use green spaces, which means that e.g., paths and infrastructure need to cater for different users, including those who are less mobile. Universal access is something to strive for. This aspect also relates to engagement of people in local greening programs, which will promote a sense of community and social cohesion.

**Recommendations for developing national policies and initiatives**

With the large majority of Nordic citizens living in cities, and given the current climate, biodiversity and public health emergencies, it is important to increase awareness and knowledge on the importance of urban green spaces and stimulate further policy and actions. Local governments play an essential role in planning and managing urban green spaces, but the role of other levels of government and other stakeholders, including community groups, non-profit organisations, businesses, and educational institutions can be enhanced. International initiatives and programmes such as the Sustainable Development Goals, the UN Decade of Restoration (which also focuses on urban ecosystems), the EU’s Biodiversity Strategy 2030, and the New European Bauhaus raise awareness of our (physical) environments and sustainable development. These need to be brought into the specific Nordic context. National governments will be an important facilitator for this, bridging between international initiatives on the one hand, and local-level action in Nordic cities on the other.

National guidance and support for urban green space in the Nordic countries should focus on the following aspects and components:

*Recognising urban green spaces as critical infrastructure and raising their profile in planning frameworks*

Urban (and regional) planning provides essential frames for the delivery and conservation of urban green spaces. Consideration of urban green spaces, including the use of the term green infrastructure, should be promoted. Although the Nordic countries have different planning legislation and frameworks, opportunities exist to address this issue also at the national level. Planning frameworks should incentivise the conservation and development of green space as part of development projects. Critical infrastructure is a term used by governments to describe assets that are essential for the functioning of a society and economy. Green infrastructure is part of this critical infrastructure. Green spaces should be made an integral part of e.g., climate adaptation strategies and disaster risk management strategies.

*Developing urban green space strategies, guidelines, and norms*

In line with international policies and initiatives, cities should be asked to develop urban green space strategies that provide longer-term, strategic direction for the development and protection of urban green spaces and the benefits (or ecosystem services) these provide. At the national level, important guidance for the development of these strategies can be provided, for example, on how these plans should be structured. Nordic cooperation provides an important platform for coordinating these efforts and sharing knowledge and good practice. Urban green space strategies will also be an important mechanism for enhanced policy integration, as these strategies should be coordinated with, and inform other relevant policies and strategies, such as general city plans and climate action strategies.Strategies need to include clear targets and the inclusion of guidelines and norms can assist. Examples of this that are already used by some Nordic cities are proximity standards, tree canopy targets, green space norms and compensation requirements for new urban developments, and biodiversity targets. New evidence and opportunities offered in terms of assessment and monitoring can support the developments of guidance as well as implementation of existing guidelines such as the 3-30-300 rule. Other areas where guidelines and norms can be developed include share of permeable soil in a city, presence of larger parks and other green spaces to promote ecosystem integrity and biodiversity, and connectivity and equitable distribution of green space.

*Generating and sharing knowledge and good practice*

National governments can play an important role in supporting the general of research and knowledge that can support urban green space planning, design, and management. Dedicated research agendas and funding streams should be set up, if these are not already in place, and research agendas should be developed jointly with municipal and other stakeholders. Capacity building should also be supported, e.g., by supporting education and training, exchange of experiences and good practices, and networking. Where possible, Nordic collaboration and synergies should be achieved. The Nordic countries already have a wealth of experience in developing urban green spaces. A more coordinated approach to learning, testing, identification and sharing of good practices and innovations would be highly beneficial.

*Please note that the final version of the policy brief will include pictures to illustrate good greening practices from the Nordic countries. Moreover, an illustration of the 3-30-300 guideline will be included. Key sources for further reference will also be added at the end of the brief.*