

Aberdeenshire Parks and Open Spaces Strategy – January 2011

Introduction and Background

The Council's Statement of Aims is very clear, *“maintain and improve the quality of life for everyone in Aberdeenshire by delivering first class public services, involving communities by consultation and working together”*

As part of this statement, the open spaces of Aberdeenshire contribute greatly to the quality of life of the residents whether it is for active or passive recreation, or just enjoyment of the open air.

Open Space is defined as:

“Any open space which provides, or has the potential to provide, environmental, social and/or economic benefits to communities, whether direct or indirect, within and around urban area. It includes greenspace and hard landscaped areas with a civic function, as well as aquatic open spaces”.

The preparation of an open space strategy has been undertaken in response to an original requirement in Scottish Planning Policy (SPP) 11, carried forward into the single combined Scottish Planning Policy. An effective strategy will also play a key part in enabling the local authority to deliver on key National Outcomes, in particular those relating to health (No 6), sustainable places (No 10) and the natural environment (No 15).

The original SPP required Councils to underpin strategic thinking on open space with a detailed assessment of the existing resource. In 2008, an audit of open spaces was carried out across Aberdeenshire, and the following year Community Councils were asked what they thought about the results. Over half of Community Councils (57%) responded, and detailed results of the audit were made available on the Council's website throughout the consultation period.

The findings fall broadly into two types:

- i) Key trends coming through in terms of the types of open space communities wish to see. A typical example would be more paths in local woodland.
- ii) Comments relating to specific sites, highlighting deficiencies or opportunities relating to the open space.

These will be particularly useful in helping the local authority determine how best to allocate resources in terms of the maintenance and management of existing open space. The information is also intended to inform decision making in relation to non-major planning applications¹, where new, formal and equipped open space may not always be necessary, depending on what is already available to a community. Within each area, a 'settlement account' has been prepared for every community of over 200 residents, reflecting the overall pattern of open space, as well as specific requirements identified by the auditors in consultation with the community (where a response was provided).

¹ Less than 50 houses or less than 2ha

Overall, however, an open space strategy needs to take into account both local findings as revealed by the audit and wider strategic issues. The latter were unlikely to be reflected either in the audit (being essentially a measurement of how things are) or the community feedback (most frequently a reflection of day to day quality of life issues).

The information gathered from the audit will be considered in three main ways:

- Alongside a standards-based approach in the determination of applications, to ensure 'best fit' for the community to be affected by any new development.
- To ensure best value in public spending, both in the delivery, and the care and maintenance of open space, taking into account the findings of the audit, the objectives of the Strategy and the current challenging financial climate.
- To ensure the targeted use of developer contributions available for open space and community facilities.

Good quality, fit for purpose open space is key to delivery on a range of National Outcomes, as defined under the terms of the Single Outcome Agreement between Aberdeenshire Council and the Scottish Government

Vision

The overall vision of the Parks and Open Spaces Strategy is to:

“provide high quality multi-functional open space that is easily accessible, safe, welcoming, rich in biodiversity and sustainably managed for the future; which encourages a sense of belonging, and enhances the quality of life of those people who live, work in and visit Aberdeenshire”.

Strategic Aims

- 1) To ensure that networks of green and open spaces are well located, designed, and managed, as well as being adaptable, appropriate and sustainable.
- 2) To improve policies and procedures in relation to the management and delivery of open space
- 3) To encourage healthy lifestyles and wellbeing
- 4) To promote community identity and cohesion
- 5) To improve the landscaping and visual appearance of communities
- 6) To conserve, manage and enhance opportunities for biodiversity/wildlife
- 7) To promote integration between the location and management of Sustainable Urban Drainage Systems (SUDS) and the open space resource
- 8) To develop the resources and structures required to implement the Strategy

Key Issues

Addressing the key issues will be critical in shaping our future communities for the better, as well as part of a necessary response to contemporary challenges. Among those the Council has considered, and which have informed our overall approach, are the following:

- Health and Wellbeing, including physical and mental health
- Outdoor education opportunities
- Demographics, and the need for ‘lifetime neighbourhoods’
- Climate change: mitigation and adaptation measures
- Biodiversity, and the need to reverse its decline
- Ecological footprint of open space
- Ecosystem services as a material consideration
- Pollution and pesticide use, especially recent EU legislation
- Requirements of ‘Designing Streets’
- Economic issues, including food and energy security
- Staff availability and training
- Land values
- Public awareness
- Legislation, in particular in how this affects maintenance options

EXISTING OPEN SPACE

Taking account of the findings of the audit, Community Plans for each area and input from Landscape Services, action plans will be developed identifying priority needs within each Area. These will cover play areas and sports pitches, trees and public art, as well as amenity open space. Some of the actions required will be funded by the Council, some will be met by amendments to the maintenance regime and others may be supported by developer contributions. Alongside these changes, the Council will actively encourage public participation and partnership in as many forms as possible to enhance work currently carried out in open spaces. This would include volunteers and community groups, as well as, for example, seeking to work with the Community Service to enable community service orders to be carried out on open space; or working with Aberdeen Greenspace to co-ordinate the training of volunteers across the Northeast.

Due to current and future budgetary issues, there will need to be a movement towards low maintenance types of open space where possible and appropriate.

NEW OPEN SPACE

A Functions-Led Approach

Every one of the key issues presents complex challenges, which could not be addressed solely through a standards-based approach to open space provision. In keeping with the modernisation agenda, Aberdeenshire Council will encourage early dialogue with developers, to ensure that key functions can be addressed, as far as possible, on a particular site. How these are delivered will vary considerably according to a site’s characteristics, so that a combination of compulsory and discretionary elements is expected to make up the public realm.

In estimating the proportion of a site likely to be required to deliver all these functions, officers have taken into account a wide range of considerations. Among them was an assessment of existing amounts of public space across Aberdeenshire's towns and villages. This yielded a wide range of percentages, often complicated by the presence of golf courses (inclusion required in terms of the Planning Advice Note (PAN) 65 typology), a coastal location or limitations of the mapping system. Nonetheless, a broad picture has emerged across settlements, of open space comprising something between 35-45%, approximately, of the land, e.g: Aboyne 49%, Banchory 52%, Blackburn 44%, Drumlithie 34%, Fordoun 34%, Fraserburgh 53%, Echt 40%.

The types of space identified in the hierarchy allows consideration of a site's ability to deliver ecosystem services (locally, as far as possible, to enable a 'closed loop' approach) and appropriate civic, recreational and amenity spaces, along with access links and shelter planting. In order to underpin a holistic approach to this full range of the 'public realm', there is a requirement that 40% of all major sites be earmarked as public open space. In practise, this proportion matches well with both the evidence from the assessment of existing proportions of space in Aberdeenshire's towns, and the work of the TCPA.

In most cases, the 40% provision will be delivered within the site boundary: since all major bid sites in the Local Development Plan (LDP) have been increased by this amount to reflect the requirement, sufficient land will be available.

Four underlying principles are identified to guide the holistic approach to the delivery of key open space functions, having regard to both key issues identified previously, economic constraints, as well as a political will to encourage community involvement. These are:

- lowest possible maintenance
- community volunteering
- the proximity principle
- connectivity

Fortunately, these tend to complement one another in a variety of ways. The overall approach to public open space provision is illustrated in *Fig. 1*.

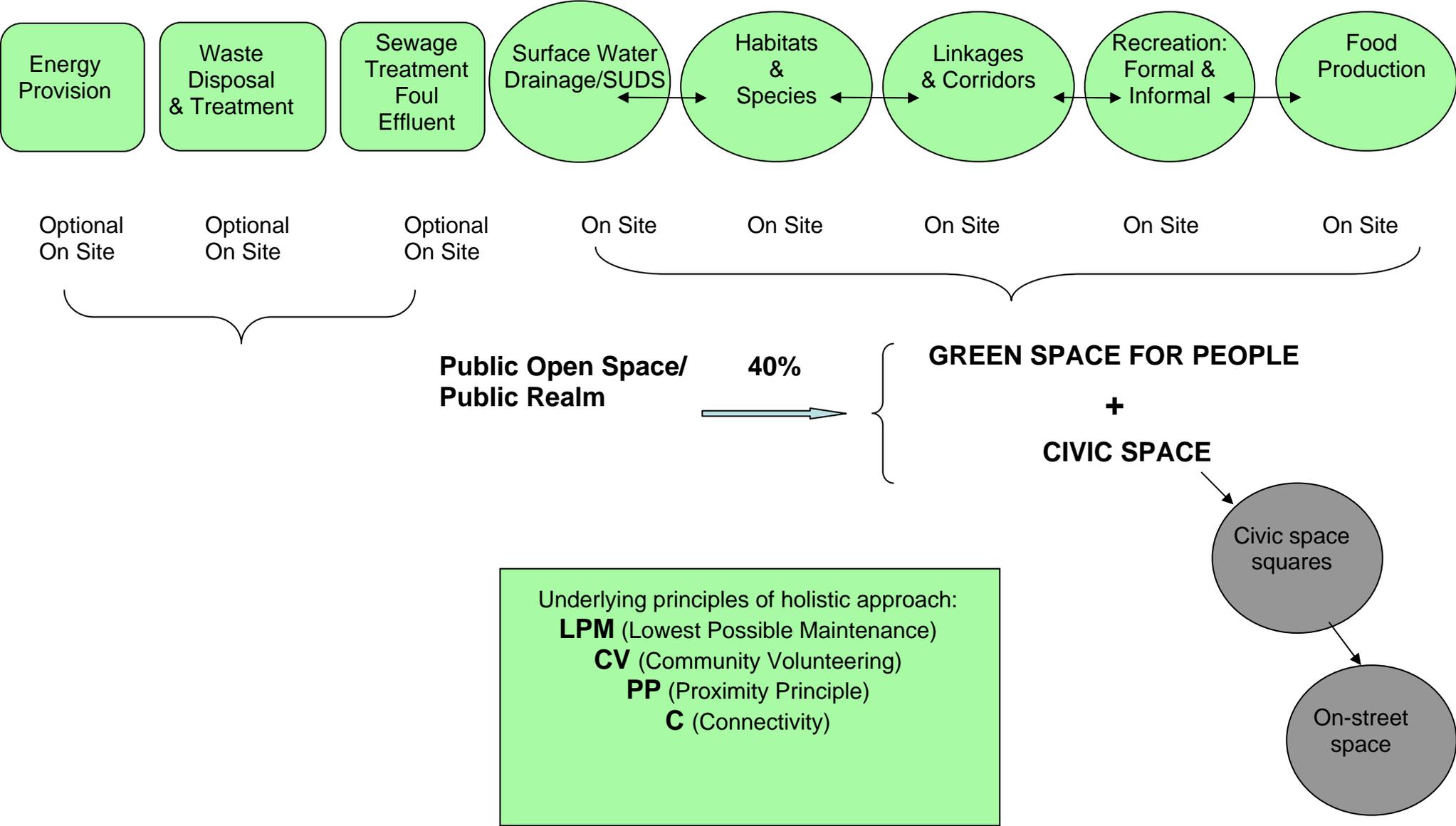
Idealised Hierarchy and Standards

Appendix 1 sets out a suggested 'hierarchy' of open space provision. In broad terms, the priority on any particular site is considered to be drainage infrastructure (soft SUDS provision and buffer strips) and linkages, both for people and for wildlife; followed by streets designed in accordance with the principles of 'Designing Streets' (therefore likely to include both green and grey spaces), and the potential for community food growing.

Where public open space is provided over and above these areas, priority should be given to accessible spaces rich in biodiversity, either with relatively low maintenance implications, or the potential for community involvement : for example woodland, or community nature areas. Where the site in question is of a scale that will require play or sports provision in accordance with standards in *Appendix 2*, arrangements for maintenance will require to be agreed with the planning authority prior to approval of any detailed planning application.

Burial grounds will be required at sites specified in the Local Development Plan, and as such are distinct from other types of open space.

**Figure 1 - Working Landscapes :
Economic, Social and Environmental Functions of Open Space**



Delivery of New Open Space

The delivery of open space in new developments will be through the master planning process in accordance with the Local Development Plan, and with specific reference to the Supplementary Guidance on Public Open Space.

In the majority of cases, delivery of open space in accordance with the standards is likely to be secured through a limitation on the planning application, together with the use of conditions. However, some instances will arise where legal agreements would be appropriate, for example:

- Where the application falls below the size which would require additional compulsory open space, but the audit identifies a shortfall in the quality or quantity of existing spaces which would be exacerbated by the addition of new housing. A contribution would be estimated on the basis of a contribution towards existing open spaces, and based on the findings of the Action Plan (see above, 'Existing Open Space').
- In relation to larger areas of land, for example where a master plan affecting a number of sites has identified the optimum location for a key open space function serving a number of sites. The key consideration will be the best way of delivering the function required for the future community. Where it can be satisfactorily demonstrated to the Planning Authority that a strategic area of open space is to be provided, some flexibility in the 40% provision may be permitted within individual parts of the overall master plan area.

Maintenance of Open Space

The Local Authority has no duty to take over the maintenance of greenspace in any new development.

The Authority will, however, take on the maintenance of those areas they are responsible for, such as burial grounds, as well as other areas where an agreement has been reached eg: in the interests of safety, or on a contractual basis.

In cases where a degree of formal maintenance is required in the public interest (which might include, for example, play areas and sports pitches), maintenance arrangements will be required. This may be with a third party, for example, a private maintenance company or the local authority on a fee paying basis, or with input from the local community and volunteers.

In lower maintenance areas, such as woodlands and community nature areas, maintenance arrangements will require to be specified by the applicant.

Figure 2 below sets out a broad hierarchy of maintenance options.

Fig 2: Maintenance Options

Tier 1 – Local Authority responsibility

Burial grounds

Schools

Local Authority property estate, including:

- Business and industrial sites
- Nursing homes & Sheltered housing
- Offices

Adopted road network, including (where appropriate):

- Swales
- Verges
- Retention ponds

Tier 2 – Other Third Party

Formal amenity space (off street)

Community nature areas

Community woodlands

Play areas

Recreation and sports areas

Parks/Country parks

Buffer strips

Street trees

Other street areas

Unadopted road network, including:

- Swales
- Verges
- Retention ponds

FUNDING

There are obvious future funding issues for open space, and as part of the strategy, the local authority will continue to explore other funding streams as far as possible. Communities are encouraged to do the same.

The Council would wish to adopt a minimum of additional maintenance burdens at the present time, reflecting the priorities broadly set out in Figure 2 above.

A variety of additional sources of funding are potentially available for open space projects. A number of these are highlighted below, but it should be noted that they may change over time:

- The Sport Scotland Lottery Fund
- The Heritage Lottery Fund
- The Forestry Commission
- The Landfill Tax Credit Scheme
- Private sector funding
- Other income generating opportunities e.g. renewable energy

APPENDICES

1 - Hierarchy of Open Space

A loosely grouped typology providing an indication of the broad functions of different open space types, size ranges, and guidance on catchments, households and distances

2 - Open Space Standards

3 - Glossary

Appendix 1: Hierarchy of Open Space

Type of Facility	Main Function	Size Range	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 📍 Catchment Population 📍 Households 📍 Distance guide (range to allow for site characteristics) 	Notes
NATURAL AND SEMI-NATURAL GREEN SPACE (including SUDS and linkages)				
Blue-Green Corridors	Buffer strips ² alongside water bodies to improve water quality, reduce run-off, and to increase biodiversity and visual amenity.	a)All watercourses: Min 6m each bank b)Larger watercourses:12-20m each bank c)Still water:12-24m	Pop:n/a Hsg:n/a Dist: n/a	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 📍 Minimum 6m strip may be increased where banks are sloping. 📍 Still water buffer zones will depend on size of water body. 📍 May be incorporated as access routes (Surfacing requirements tbc) and green corridors. 📍 Play an important role in mitigating flood risk and permitting access for long term maintenance.
Neighbourhood Green Space	Informal amenity: for 'structure planting', green corridors, access routes (recreational and functional) visual impact: may include community nature areas.	500-2500 square metres	Pop 10-500 Hhlds: Over 5 Dist: n/a	Location chosen for the function it is to fulfil eg: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 📍 to the windward side of housing to provide shelter 📍 to take advantage of wildlife potential 📍 In a focal point to provide amenity 📍 based around the position of SUDS 📍 to provide green arteries linking larger spaces Likely to have potential for community involvement.
Community Woodlands	To provide woodland access for all, and enhance biodiversity	>2ha	Pop: Hhlds: 1000 (Dist: 500m)	May include those formally identified under the Woodlands In and Around Towns (WIAT) scheme. To be linked where possible and desirable, by smaller areas of woodland or access routes to enhance forest habitat networks.(FHNs) May have informal 'forest' play areas incorporated. Although 2ha advised as minimum, is generally preferable to merge 'allocations' where possible, in terms of habitat creation. Distance reflects aspirational target of Woodland Trust's <i>Woodland Access Standard</i> .
NEIGHBOURHOOD STREETS				
On Street Open Space	To provide community space for all ages, especially younger children and the elderly. To enhance visual and biodiversity value of the street.		Pop:n/a Hhlds:n/a Dist:n/a	Designed for pedestrian use, with minimum of on street parking. Particular benefits of this type of 'home-zone' will be for the less mobile in the community and the elderly; on street play areas overlooked by houses of importance for young children, wanting to engage in 'social play' but needing supervision; other informal play, and seating. Street trees to be included to enhance visual and biodiversity value.

² Guidance for Developers: Buffer Strips Adjacent to Water Courses and Water Bodies (Aberdeenshire Council)

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Type of Facility	Main Function	Size Range	📍 Catchment Population 📍 Households 📍 Distance Guide (range to allow for site characteristics)	Notes
OTHER FUNCTIONAL GREENSPACE				
Community Food Growing Areas	Community food growing such as individual allotments or orchards	200 square metres per plot	Pop: approx 1 plot to 50 people Hshlds: 1 plot per 20 (0.02ha) 30 per 600 (0.6ha) Dist: 800m (any direction)	Based on Scottish Allotments and Gardens Society advice, combined with local evidence that food growing is more likely to be taken up where suitable land is made available. Developer to provide access to site, and water supply. Needs to be sited adjacent to other greenspace to allow for flexibility.
Burial Grounds			As indicated by Development Plan	Only required where identified in Development Plan. Site must be flat, and acceptable to Local Authority following ground-testing. To be considered during development framework process.
EQUIPPED PLAY AREAS				
Community Play Areas/ Recreation Areas	Formal playing space, with equipment and some informal areas: for children and teenagers	2,500-4,000 square metres	Pop:250-1000 Hhlds: 100-400 Dist: 400m (any direction)	For younger children, they should be reasonably close to catchments and preferably not across any busy road. Areas of play should be fenced against dogs and have consideration of potential noise and visibility issues. Appropriate provision to be made for teenagers , with a range of facilities and equipment for all abilities , to respond to the need for exercise and recreation by different groups. To include sheltered seating/ seating facilities.

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Type of Facility	Main Function	Size Range	↕ Catchment Population ↕ Households ↕ Distance Guide (range to allow for site characteristics)	Notes
SPORTS				
Organised Sports Facilities	Formal recreation grass pitches, all weather pitches, changing facilities, multi-use games areas and tennis courts for organised sporting activities.	7,500-15,000 square metres adult football and rugby or approx 1000 square metres for multi use area (not including parking/facilities)	Pop: 1000-5000 Hhlds:400-2,000 Dist: 1500-2000m	Often usefully associated with a Premier park, they can also be relatively distant and involve road crossing, but (except for a dry ski slope) need flat, well drained ground. Areas with a multiple number of recreation facilities will require changing facilities. Provision to be guided by findings of Aberdeenshire Council Pitches Study.
PARKS				
Local Park	Strategic 'green lungs' of a town, with semi-formal and informal open space for walking, wildlife, picnics and enjoyment of the scenery for all the family.	1-4 ha	Pop: 2,500+ Hhlds: 1000 Dist: 600-1000m (any direction)	A sense of the country in the town, often also an expression of civic pride. People will take a considered decision to visit, so distance and road-crossing are less important. The site's intrinsic character, eg: based on a riverside, hill or wood is often the most critical factor, although proximity to population is clearly also significant.
Premier Park	To provide high quality informal and formal facilities	>4ha	Pop: 4000+ Hhlds: 1500 Dist: 1000-1500m (any direction)	In order to qualify as a 'premier park', needs to provide at least 12 out of a range of facilities, as defined by APSE (Assn of Public Service Excellence). Determined by range of facilities rather than size, .so a local park (above) could also be a Premier Park – though likely to be over 4ha.
Country Park	Access to countryside managed for recreation for all age groups.	N/A	Pop: Over 60,000 Hhlds:n/a Dist: n/a	May be adjacent to a town, or in between settlements; often centred on additional facility such as historic building. May provide a variety of way marked walks, and range of play options. Location within region is key consideration.

Appendix 2: Standards for Public Open Space

Number of Houses Proposed	Development Design Process*	Mix of Open Space (to meet total requirement) 📍 Type of Space	Minimum Number of sites	Distance of Each Type of Space from Houses in Catchment 📍 Guide	Total Space Required
600-1000	Scale 1 Devt framework Masterplan Detailed app	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Premier Park (1500 -2000 houses) ➤ Local Park ➤ Organised Sports ➤ Community Play Areas ➤ Community Food Growing Areas ➤ Burial Grounds ➤ Neighbourhood Greenspace ➤ Community Woodlands ➤ Blue-green Corridors ➤ Neighbourhood Streets 	Upto 1 1 1 or off site contribution 2-4 30-50 /0.6-0.9ha Where required in LDP As Appropriate As Appropriate As Appropriate As Appropriate	1000-1500m 600-1000m 1500-2000m 400m 800m n/a n/a (500m) n/a n/a	40% of site
250-599	Scale 2 Masterplan Detailed app	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Organised Sports ➤ Community Play Areas ➤ Community Food Growing ➤ Burial Grounds ➤ Neighbourhood Greenspace ➤ Community Woodlands ➤ Blue-green Corridors ➤ Neighbourhood Streets 	Upto 1 1-2 12-30/0.25-0.5ha As Appropriate As Appropriate As Appropriate As Appropriate	1500-2000m 400m 800m n/a (500m) n/a n/a	40% of site
50-249	Scale 2 Masterplan Detailed app	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Community Play Areas ➤ Community Food Growing ➤ Neighbourhood Greenspace ➤ Community Woodlands ➤ Blue-green Corridors ➤ Neighbourhood Streets 	0-1 Up to 0.25 ha As Appropriate As Appropriate As Appropriate As Appropriate	500m 800m n/a (500m) n/a n/a	40% of site
5-49	Scale 3 Devt brief Detailed app	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Contribution to existing parks, sports, play areas and food growing areas ➤ Natural and Semi Natural Greenspace ➤ Community Woodlands ➤ Blue-green Corridors ➤ Neighbourhood Streets 	As Appropriate As Appropriate As Appropriate As Appropriate As Appropriate	n/a n/a (500m) n/a n/a	120m ² per house <i>With/or</i> Contribution to existing where need identified In audit

Appendix 3: Glossary of Terms

Action Plan

The Action Plan is a list of the tasks that are required to achieve the objectives of the Parks and Open Spaces Strategy, with priorities and action based on information from the audit and national priorities as reflected in National Outcomes.

Amenity

Attribute of a site or feature that is perceived as pleasant and provides tangible advantages to passers-by, residents, commerce, tourists, wildlife, or other important interests in appropriate circumstances.

Biodiversity

The variety of life that surrounds and sustains us, including animals, plants and micro-organisms and the dynamic inter-relationships of living species and communities operating together to produce living habitats and ecosystems.

Developer contributions

Capital payments used for on-site or off-site works that are required as a result of the related development, for example, the improvement of a nearby play park.

Ecosystem services

The range of benefits provided by the functioning of natural ecosystems, including products, such as clean drinking water, and processes, such as the decomposition of waste or sequestration of carbon.

Green infrastructure

Green infrastructure is a strategically planned and delivered network providing a broad range of greenspaces and other environmental features. It should be designed and managed as a multifunctional resource capable of delivering those ecological services and quality of life benefits required by communities it serves and needed to underpin sustainability. Its design and management should also respect and enhance the character and distinctiveness of an area with regard to habitats and landscape types.

Green network

The system of green spaces within the urban area and links between them, from a town or village centre through to the edge of town and surrounding countryside.

Green space

Greenspace consists of any vegetated land or structure, water or geological feature within or adjoining an urban area.

Grey space

Often used to describe civic space (see below).

Open space

The term 'open space' covers greenspace, consisting of any vegetated land or structure, water or geological feature in an urban area, and civic space, consisting of squares, market places, and other paved or hard landscaped areas with a civic function. Connections for people and wildlife are included.

Open space audit

A database which records a wide range of characteristics of each space (including for example, the type, size, condition, location), and provides some insight as to problems and opportunities, where applicable.

Open Space Strategy

Using the information from the audit, authorities are required to prepare an open space strategy which sets out a vision of new and improved open spaces, and addresses any deficiencies identified. The Aberdeenshire Parks and Open Spaces Strategy covers issues relating the maintenance and management of existing spaces, as well as proposing a new approach for future developments.

Scottish Planning Policy

Scottish Planning Policy is a statement of the Scottish Government's policy on nationally important land use matters. It includes subject policies on open space audits and strategies and open space and physical activity, as well as related areas such as trees and woodland and protected species.

Sustainability

Something is sustainable if doing it now does not make it more difficult or impossible to do it in the future. Aberdeenshire Council's principles of sustainability include a commitment to ensure that long term and global impacts like increasing greenhouses gases and loss of species have a greater weighting than short term or local effects. Where there is a potential threat to the environment or to communities, the precautionary principle shall apply.

Sustainable drainage systems (SUDS or SuDs)

Formerly known as Sustainable Urban Drainage Systems. An approach to managing rainfall and run-off in developments, with a view to replicating natural drainage. SuDS also aim to control pollution, re-charge groundwater, control flooding, and often provide landscape and biodiversity enhancements.

Typology

The systematic classification of types of greenspace that have characteristics or traits in common. PAN 65 suggests a greenspace typology, including parks, private grounds, amenity greenspace, playspace, sports areas, green corridors, natural/semi-natural greenspaces, other functional greenspace and civic spaces.

Wellbeing

A positive physical, social, mental and emotional state where an individual or community's basic needs are met, and they are able to achieve personal fulfilment and play an active part in society.