

Parks and Open Spaces

Parks and Greenspaces for Health and Wellbeing: Our Open Space Strategy

East Lothian Council

Background

East Lothian Council approved its [Open Space Strategy](#) in January 2026, establishing a ten-year framework for the development, enhancement and management of parks, greenspaces, sports pitches and other publicly accessible open spaces. The strategy seeks to protect existing spaces, guide high-quality provision in new developments and address health and wellbeing, climate resilience, biodiversity and social equity. It also supports statutory planning obligations and will inform the next Local Development Plan. Developed in-house with input from services across East Lothian Council, the strategy retains local knowledge and creates a shared basis for future delivery.

Parks and greenspaces are recognised as important community assets that support physical activity, outdoor play, social connection, access to nature, local food growing and civic life. They also contribute to the character and setting of East Lothian's towns and villages and provide wider environmental, economic and tourism benefits. The strategy brings these functions together through three interconnected themes: health and wellbeing, climate and nature. Its ambition is to create greener, fairer and healthier places that are safe, welcoming and accessible to all.

Key activities

1. Establishing the Evidence Base

East Lothian Council undertook an audit of 462 publicly accessible open spaces during 2024 and 2025, covering over 1,800 hectares. The audit included council and privately managed sites within and around settlements, including parks, green networks, civic spaces, sports areas, play spaces, allotments, community growing spaces, cemeteries and churchyards. Sites were mapped using geographic information systems and assessed against standards for quantity, quality and accessibility.

2. Consulting Local Communities

Public consultation tested the audit findings, identified additional locally important spaces and explored what encourages or prevents people from using parks and greenspaces. Targeted engagement included representatives of women's groups and ethnic minority representative groups. Communities identified nature areas, trees, informal multi-use grassed areas, seating and good paths among their leading priorities. Around one third of respondents reported being involved in their local parks and greenspaces, demonstrating an existing foundation for community participation.

3. Setting Improvement Priorities

The findings informed priorities to protect and enhance open spaces, improve paths and active travel connections, provide suitable seating and rest points, strengthen play and recreational opportunities, expand community growing and volunteering, and improve access to nature. The strategy also

commits East Lothian Council to addressing barriers affecting particular groups and targeting investment towards spaces where quality is lower or health inequalities are greater.

4. Delivering Local Enhancements

A Greenspace Delivery and Monitoring Working Group was established within operational arrangements to coordinate delivery across council services. Improvements that are underway and have been delivered include new benches and social seating, cycle racks, paths, inclusive play equipment and spaces for older children and teenagers. Pump tracks have been developed in Ormiston, Dunbar and North Berwick, alongside other community-led recreational improvements. Community gardens, growing spaces and nature projects have also been supported in locations including Tranent and Prestonpans.

5. Expanding Nature-Rich Spaces

East Lothian Council is moving beyond an approach centred primarily on maintained grass towards more varied, nature-rich and multifunctional spaces. Activity includes habitat creation, ponds, nature networks, tree planting and canopy expansion. The Tranent Tree Town partnership project aims to plant 3,000 trees each year for three years, helping to increase tree cover and expand the East Lothian Climate Forest within an area identified as having comparatively low canopy cover.

Benefits and impact

A Stronger Basis for Investment

The audit has provided East Lothian Council with a detailed understanding of the location, quality and accessibility of open spaces. All cluster areas met the minimum quantity standard of at least 60 square metres per household, and most spaces were assessed as fit for purpose. At the same time, the evidence identified specific sites and features requiring attention, particularly seating, paths, accessibility for different abilities and biodiversity. This enables available resources to be directed more systematically towards recognised needs rather than relying on general assumptions.

Healthier Everyday Environments

The strategy treats greenspace as an important part of public health infrastructure. Accessible, good-quality spaces provide opportunities for walking, cycling, sport, outdoor play, relaxation, volunteering and connection with nature. They can also support social interaction and preventative approaches to health. By integrating health considerations into standards for quality, quantity and accessibility, East Lothian Council has established a practical connection between the management of physical places and its wider ambition to support healthier and more connected communities.

Greater Inclusion and Accessibility

The work has broadened the understanding of accessibility beyond the distance between homes and open spaces. Engagement identified mobility and disability barriers, concerns about safety, unsuitable routes and facilities, and experiences of cultural exclusion and racism. These findings have informed a stronger focus on inclusive design, safe and welcoming environments, accessible play equipment, social seating and facilities for different ages and abilities. Although further work is required, the approach provides a clearer basis for addressing unequal experiences of public space.

More Relevant Community Facilities

Community input has influenced both strategic priorities and practical projects. Improvements such as seating, a book barn, an outdoor chessboard, a sensory trail and community-led recreational facilities demonstrate how local involvement can shape places around the ways communities wish to use them. The provision of spaces for teenagers and older children also responds to an identified gap in traditional play provision. This should help create a more varied network of spaces that accommodates informal activity, socialising, play and recreation across different age groups.

Increased Opportunities for Participation

Community gardens, growing areas, tree planting and volunteering projects offer residents opportunities to contribute directly to their local environment. These activities support outdoor participation while strengthening relationships between East Lothian Council, community organisations and local volunteers. Community involvement has also helped identify alternative funding and delivery options. The approach recognises communities not only as users of open spaces but as partners with knowledge, ideas and resources that can support their improvement over time.

Connected Environmental Benefits

Nature enhancement is being integrated with health, recreation and climate resilience rather than treated as a separate objective. Tree planting, habitat creation, ponds and connected nature networks can support biodiversity while improving opportunities for people to experience nature close to home. Nature-based interventions may also contribute to flood management and climate mitigation. This multifunctional approach allows individual spaces to deliver several outcomes and strengthens the case for investment across different policy and service priorities.

Learning and reflections

Evidence Supports Clear Decisions

A detailed baseline provides a credible foundation for prioritisation, planning and future evaluation. Combining mapping and quality assessments with community insight has helped East Lothian Council distinguish between overall provision and the experience of using individual spaces. The findings show that having sufficient greenspace does not necessarily mean that every resident can use it safely or comfortably. Measures of quantity therefore need to be considered alongside quality, accessibility and inclusion.

Communities Improve Local Delivery

Engagement is most valuable when it influences practical decisions and continues beyond the preparation of a strategy. Local communities can identify barriers, valued features and opportunities that may not be visible through technical assessment alone. Their involvement can also bring volunteer effort, local ownership and access to additional funding. Planned co-design and co-production of park management plans offer a route for maintaining this involvement during implementation.

Sustainable Funding Remains Important

Securing funding, particularly longer-term revenue support, remains a challenge. East Lothian Council has responded by using a combination of public funding, external grants, developer contributions, partnership arrangements and community support. Future delivery is likely to require blended funding

models that recognise the multiple benefits provided by open spaces. Clearly linking projects to health, climate, planning and community priorities can strengthen funding cases and open access to a wider range of potential resources.

Monitoring Will Strengthen Progress

The development of a monitoring and evaluation framework will be important in demonstrating progress and understanding which interventions are most effective. Park management plans informed by audit findings and community views should provide a more consistent route from strategic ambition to local action. Embedding the approach within planning policy and the Local Development Plan will also help ensure that expectations for accessible, high-quality green infrastructure are reflected in future development.

The Council's approach provides a positive foundation for improving parks and greenspaces across East Lothian. By combining evidence, community involvement and partnership working, it supports the development of accessible, inclusive and nature-rich places that can contribute to health, wellbeing and stronger communities.

Contact for enquiries

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