

Parks and Open Spaces

Nearer to Nature

North Lanarkshire Council

Background

Nearer to Nature is a two-and-a-half-year initiative running from January 2026 to May 2028. Its purpose is to support the creation of fairer, more resilient and better-connected greenspaces across North Lanarkshire. The project forms part of the Nature Towns and Cities programme and builds on nature networks previously developed with neighbouring local authorities. Dedicated project capacity has enabled North Lanarkshire Council to explore new approaches, strengthen advocacy and work more closely across council services and with external partners.

The project has brought together environmental justice mapping, community consultation and co-design, greenspace ambassadors, detailed design proposals, a digital platform and a blended finance model. These elements will inform a greenspace infrastructure plan covering 18 priority sites. Rather than operating only as a strategic document, the plan is intended to provide a practical basis for delivery, including costed and consulted-upon proposals that can form a pipeline of investment-ready projects over a ten-year period.

Key activities

1. Mapping Environmental Justice

North Lanarkshire Council developed an environmental justice mapping tool to identify communities experiencing greater social and environmental disadvantage. The tool combines social and environmental evidence to highlight inequalities in access to greenspace, exposure to environmental risks and opportunities to strengthen local nature networks. Bringing this information together provides a consistent evidence base for understanding how access to quality greenspace varies across North Lanarkshire. It also helps identify locations where environmental improvements could respond to both community needs and gaps in habitat connectivity.

2. Selecting Priority Greenspaces

The mapping process informed the selection of 18 greenspaces across nine community board areas. Their distribution reflected deprivation and population data, ensuring that the selection process considered both local need and the number of people living within each area. Council ownership was also taken into account, as this could make future improvements more practical to plan and deliver. The selected greenspaces are distributed across North Lanarkshire, providing a basis for exploring how a consistent approach could be applied in places with different characteristics and requirements.

3. Assessing Sites Collaboratively

A range of council services are contributing to the assessment of the selected sites, bringing together operational knowledge and specialist expertise. The process considers how each greenspace is currently used, its accessibility and environmental value, and the condition of its existing features. It

also examines maintenance requirements, practical constraints and opportunities for nature-based improvements. This collaborative assessment process helps build a fuller understanding of each site before proposals are developed, and identifies any existing plans or operational considerations that may influence future design decisions.

4. Engaging Local Communities

Engagement is designed to begin with residents' experiences rather than predetermined interventions. Communities will be asked how they currently use their local greenspaces, what may prevent or discourage access and what types of improvements they would value. A range of engagement methods will be used, including questionnaires, creative activities, work with schools, facilitated discussions and a greenspace ambassador programme. Creative practitioners will also work with communities to gather insights that can inform the physical design of individual sites. These different participation routes are intended to provide residents with accessible ways to contribute according to their interests and circumstances.

5. Preparing Future Investment

Detailed designs will be developed for all 18 greenspaces, informed by the mapping, site assessments and community engagement. This work will be supported by a blended finance model that explores opportunities to combine public, grant, philanthropic, corporate and private investment. The designs will contribute to a coordinated greenspace infrastructure plan, bringing individual site proposals together within a longer-term framework. The plan is intended to establish a clear route from identifying priorities and developing designs to securing investment and supporting delivery over a ten-year period.

Benefits and impact

Fairer Investment Priorities

The environmental justice approach provides a clearer basis for directing limited resources towards communities where investment may offer the greatest benefit. It moves beyond relying mainly on requests from established groups or focusing on already well-used parks and nature reserves. By bringing together social, environmental and spatial evidence, North Lanarkshire Council can make more transparent and equitable decisions about where attention and investment should be prioritised.

More Inclusive Greenspaces

Early assessments have shown that a greenspace may appear satisfactory while still meeting the needs of only a limited range of users. A site may contain play or sports facilities but offer fewer opportunities for older people, people with mobility requirements or residents seeking informal recreation. Understanding who does not use a greenspace, and why, should support designs that provide a broader range of activities, improve access and create more welcoming places for different sections of the community.

Improved Habitat Connections

Considering nature networks alongside community data creates opportunities to achieve environmental and social benefits together. Interventions could strengthen woodland, wetland or grassland habitat connections while improving greenspace within priority communities. Including biodiversity evidence in site assessments also helps ensure that proposed changes respond appropriately to existing ecological value and contribute to wider environmental resilience.

Stronger Community Influence

The co-design process gives communities an opportunity to influence priorities before specific solutions are agreed. A range of participation methods is being developed to reach people who may not engage through conventional consultation. Creative activities, school-based work, questionnaires, ambassador roles and immersive experiences offer different ways for residents to contribute. The findings will inform spatial designs, creating a clearer connection between community participation and practical proposals.

Better Delivery Prospects

Developing detailed, costed and community-informed designs is expected to place North Lanarkshire Council in a stronger position to pursue future investment. The blended finance model provides opportunities to draw on a range of funding sources to support improvements across multiple greenspaces. Bringing the sites together within a coordinated infrastructure plan will create a clear route from evidence and community engagement through to design, investment and delivery.

Learning and reflections

Dedicated Capacity Supports Innovation

Dedicated project capacity has created time to explore new approaches, develop partnerships and coordinate work across services. This has supported the development of environmental justice mapping and more inclusive forms of engagement. The experience indicates that focused capacity is important not only for project administration, but also for enabling innovation, advocacy and sustained collaboration.

Data Needs Local Knowledge

Mapping can reveal inequalities and opportunities that may not otherwise be visible, but it cannot provide a complete understanding of individual places. Ground-truthing has been important in identifying access and maintenance issues, patterns of use and concerns such as vandalism, fly-tipping and antisocial behaviour. Combining data with professional expertise and community knowledge provides a more balanced basis for decision-making.

Engagement Should Start Openly

Beginning engagement with questions about existing use, barriers and aspirations allows communities to shape the nature of proposed improvements. This differs from presenting residents with a predetermined intervention and asking whether they support it. The more open approach provides greater scope for meaningful influence, although careful facilitation is needed to translate a wide range of views into practical and deliverable designs.

Communication Requires Care

Presenting environmental justice information publicly requires sensitive language and clear visual communication. Labels or colour schemes that appear to define communities negatively could create unintended perceptions and undermine engagement. Framing the information around opportunities for positive investment can communicate inequality honestly while avoiding the presentation of communities solely in terms of disadvantage.

Long-term Stewardship Matters

Early site assessments have reinforced the importance of considering maintenance and stewardship alongside physical investment. Damaged paths, poor lighting, vandalism and unmanaged areas may affect how people use and perceive a greenspace, even where it has attractive natural features. Involving operational services and communities at an early stage should help ensure that proposed improvements are realistic, durable and capable of being supported over time.

The Council's approach demonstrates how environmental evidence, community involvement and long-term planning can be brought together to support greenspace improvement. By developing practical proposals that reflect local priorities, the project provides a positive foundation for creating fairer, more resilient and better-connected greenspaces across North Lanarkshire.

Contact for enquiries

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