Greening for Health in Belfast

Webinar Report, Tuesday 29th March 2022, 12:00 pm -13:30pm

Background to the Webinar

Belfast Healthy Cities Strategic Plan sets out 'greening the city' as a key programme for the organisation during Phase VII (2020-2025) of the World Health Organization (WHO) European Healthy Cities Network, to support the themes of People, Place, Planet, Prosperity, Participation, and Peace. The goal of the programme is to create mutually beneficial relationships between citizens and the urban environment for improved physical and mental wellbeing.

Underpinning the overarching goal of the greening the city programme are four strategic objectives that Belfast Healthy Cities have committed to working towards. These are to:

1. Promote inclusive green environments for all, increasing physical activity and mental wellbeing to reduce the risk of long term disease.

2. Encourage the greening of public spaces to mitigate the consequences of climate change, support bio-diversity, and increase recognition that trees and other vegetation are critical urban infrastructures.

3. Increase stakeholder collaboration and community engagement in the design of green spaces.

4. Promote green space interventions to reduce health inequalities.

To aid in the development of this programme Belfast Healthy Cities undertook a scoping exercise. This involved a review of documents related to the greening the city programme, and discussions with approximately 40 stakeholders that are working to address environmental, health, and inequality issues in Belfast. The scoping exercise assessed the current understanding and uptake of the greening the city agenda, and identified emerging priority actions for the organisation.

The initial indication of the gaps and opportunities for Belfast Healthy Cities to consider were:

1. The need to build capacity and promote joint working amongst stakeholders.

2. The development and sharing of evidence and best practice.

3. Enabling all individuals and communities to shape and use green and blue spaces and features.

Following the scoping exercise, Belfast Healthy Cities will develop a greening the city working group and action plan to support the delivery of the programme. Stakeholders were invited to continue to inform and shape this process by attending the greening for health in Belfast webinar. The webinar shared the findings of the evidence review and discussions with stakeholders, invited speakers from Belfast City Council and Cork Healthy Cities to share their experience and ideas, and provided an opportunity for participants to begin to consider and discuss the emerging priority areas for action, and their involvement in the greening the city working group moving forward.

Presentations

The webinar was chaired by Carol Ramsey, Belfast Healthy Cities Board of Directors. Carol provided a brief overview of the structure and purpose of the event, and encouraged stakeholders to inform and shape this process through discussions at the webinar, and joining a working group moving forward. Presentation were delivered by Belfast Healthy Cities, Belfast City Council and Cork Healthy Cities. These linked closely to the emerging priority areas identified from the scoping exercise. Presentations were followed by breakout room discussions exploring the three themes in more detail. A recording of the webinar is available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4DqLozp9xMo

Presentation 1 'Greening the City Programme'

Aranvir Singh Gawera, Programme Officer, Belfast Healthy Cities

Aran set out the overall goal and objectives of the greening the city programme, the approach to developing the programme, the findings of the evidence review and discussions with stakeholders, and next steps.

Key points highlighted were:

- A situational analysis of the themes of People, Place, Planet, Prosperity, Participation, and Peace was undertaken as part of the Phase VII (2020-2025) WHO Healthy Cities Network application.

- Greening the city was raised as a key priority for partners moving forward, leading to its inclusion in the Belfast Healthy Cities Strategic Plan (2020-2025).

- The development of the programme has been supported by a scoping exercise involving an evidence review and conversations with stakeholders.

- The WHO (2016)[1] sets out that green spaces are necessary features of a healthy place, and that the benefits of this infrastructure can be maximised through adequate planning, design and evaluation.

- The definition of greening the city depends on context. There is a tendency to focus on urban green spaces, typically for public recreational use, but the term aims to encompass all green and blue spaces and features in Belfast, such as the Belfast hills, water bodies, greenways, civic spaces, and green and blue features such as street trees.

- Interpretations seemed to be based on the different spheres of influence of stakeholders. Those working closely on environmental protection and advocacy tended to draw out the multifunctional benefits of greening. In contrast, those working within the health sector focused on the use of these spaces, and those working closely with communities drew out a particular emphasis on connections to health inequalities.

- Overall, it should be recognised that when talking about greening the city, there are different interpretations of what this means and there is a need to facilitate a common language.

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[1] World Health Organization (2016) Urban Green Spaces and Health: A Review of Evidence. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe. Available at: https://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/environment-and-health/urban-health/publications/2016/urban-green-spaces-and-health-a-review-of-evidence-2016

- Greening the city is important for health and wellbeing. Benefits supported by evidence included improved mental health and reduced stress; reduced prevalence of people with cardiovascular related illnesses or type 2 diabetes; and, that the biggest benefits are seen when people use these spaces.

- Some of the links between greening, health and inequalities which are supported by evidence are, that broadly speaking, the quantity, access, and use of green spaces are not uniform. The distribution of green and blue features and spaces, for example, tend to be distributed unfairly, with areas of higher health deprivation tending to have lower levels of green space provision and access.

- In addition, marginalised groups, such as refugees, older people, those with limited mobility, or women tend to use green spaces less and have greater exposure to environmental risks. Similarly, the greatest direct and indirect benefits to health and wellbeing associated with the provision and use of green and blue spaces and features tend to be seen with marginalised groups.

- The scoping exercise showed there was a clear need to help bring stakeholders working in different disciplines and sectors together across the whole lifecycle of greening the city projects and programmes; support the development and sharing of evidence and best practice; and, to help enable all individuals and communities to shape and use green and blue spaces and features.

- The next steps for the greening the city programme are to develop an action plan and cross sector working group, which will be informed by the discussions at the webinar, with attendees invited to express interest by emailing aranvir@belfasthealthycities.com .

More information about the greening the city programme and the findings of the scoping exercise can be found here: https://belfasthealthycities.com/greening-city.

Presentation 2 'Greening and Health in Belfast'

Mark Whittaker, Senior Planning Officer, Belfast City Council

Mark set out the links between public health and city planning, the challenges and changing approach for sustainable development, and further details of the Belfast Local Development Plan 2035 and Belfast Green and Blue Infrastructure Plan 2020.

Key points highlighted were:

- Public health has been at the core of the town planning system, linking to Ebenezer Howard's green cities movement, which started towards the end of the 19th century, and this has been reiterated during COVID-19.

- Issues being considered include poor air quality which links to poorer health and deaths, climate change, flooding, fires, storms, heatwaves, cold snaps and loss of biodiversity, with a need for systemic change to address these issues.

- There is an emerging shift from using traditional solutions which are heavily engineering based, towards interventions that have multifunctional benefits such as helping to

contribute towards better physical and mental health, supporting biodiversity and addressing a changing climate.

- The Belfast Local Development Plan 2035 has been found sound subject to amendments. This has an overall strategy for sustainable growth, integration of land use and infrastructure, sustainable densities, compact urban form, accessibility and neighbourhoods.

- Emerging planning policies include consideration of open space and green infrastructure, active travel and connectivity, affordable and special need housing, and good quality urban design and place making.

- The Belfast Local Development Plan 2035 recognises the benefits of improved provision and quality of a variety of open spaces in Belfast, and the importance of accessibility to these spaces.

- The Belfast Green and Blue Infrastructure Plan 2020 has been adopted by Belfast City Council and is a corporate document. Key principles of the strategy are: biodiverse; planned, interconnected networks; integrated into the urban environment; well designed and managed; and, appropriately funded. The plan recognises the multiple benefits of green and blue infrastructure, including the links to leisure and recreation, health and wellbeing, climate resilience, active travel, sustainable urban drainage systems and flood risk, and supporting biodiversity.

- Overall planners are recognising clear links between planning, health and wellbeing, and greening the city.

The Belfast Local Development Plan 2035 and Belfast Green and Blue Infrastructure Plan 2020 is available at: https://www.belfastcity.gov.uk/Planning-and-building-control/Planning/Local-development-plan-(1) and https://www.belfastcity.gov.uk/gbip.

Presentation 3 'Supporting joined up action for greening and health'
Denise Cahill, Healthy Cities Co-ordinator, Cork City

Denise set out the context for greening and health in Cork and the approach taken to develop partnerships and joined up action to support greening interventions. Denise shared a number of exemplar projects completed in Cork, with a focus on community empowerment in the design, use, and long term management of green spaces and nature, and provided reflections for developing and delivering the greening the city programme in Belfast.

Key points highlighted were:

- Cork is designated a WHO European Healthy City, with associated Phase VII Action Plan (2020-2030) which aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Greening and Health is an important part of this agenda, with evidence indicating three gaps to address. These were conceptual and empathy failures, knowledge failures, and implementation failures.

- The green spaces for health programme has and continues to be delivered in Cork. This began with a Food Forest pilot, with communities greening and growing an underused space in a car park.

- This was followed by the Parkowen initiative which transformed a neglected green space into a positive place for community use. This used a community empowerment process, and utilised a permaculture approach towards improvements and the long term management of this space.

- A number of other projects also formed part of the green spaces for health programme. These involved encouraging St John's Central College to support bees and beehives, working with residents of a housing estate to transform a local green area into a community garden, developing a tree trail to support engagement with nature during COVID-19 restrictions, and planting food growing spaces in city centre park-lets.

- On reflection, there were a number of elements key to the success of the work in Cork. This included having a coordinator that helped to support, empower, and build capacity of communities. Working beyond silos and professional boundaries, described as a 'honey bee' approach. Utilising food as a way to engage, empower and build communities. Being able to value and measure the contribution of volunteers. Finding and using the several levers that are available to promote buy in, such as the SDGs, or age-friendly and playful cities programmes. Seeking alliance with those already working on the greening the city agenda; and, moving beyond the individual approach, to one that is collective, environmental and connects to global perspectives.

Further details of the green spaces for health initiative in Cork, can be found here: https://corkhealthycities.com/greenspacesforhealth/

Breakout Room Discussions

Room 1 'What is needed to build capacity across sectors to support greening and health in Belfast?'

The discussion was chaired by Mark Whittaker, Senior Planning Officer, Belfast City Council, and rapporteur provided by Aranvir Singh Gawera, Programme Officer, Belfast Healthy Cities.

Participants of the breakout room discussion were asked to consider:

1. **What are the key things that struck you about the presentations?**
2. **What are the key challenges for building capacity across sectors to support greening and health in Belfast?**
3. **How do we begin to address these issues, so that Belfast has greener, more inclusive and mutually beneficial environments for everyone?**

The discussion involved stakeholders working across the environment, health and community sectors.

Reflections from the presentations were:

- A clear desire to do much more with public spaces, and ensuring these have multiple functions, for example to address flood risk.
- An identified gap of understanding who is and is not using green and blue spaces in Belfast, and why.

Key challenges to address were:

- The need to change people's perception of green and blues spaces, so that these are seen as multifunctional with both direct and indirect benefits to health and wellbeing.
- Bringing stakeholders together and building capacity for those delivering and supporting greening for health interventions.
- Recognising the importance of on the ground support to communities.
- Maintaining community interest over the long term, alongside short term funding cycles.
- Tensions between focusing on the development of evidence to justify interventions, and piloting projects to demonstrate and measure impacts.
- A need to improve how existing and new evidence is shared with, and understood by, different audiences and sectors.

Opportunities to consider include:

- To develop a shared agenda between partners on greening the city.

Room 2 'What is needed to support joined up action for greening and health in Belfast?'

The discussion was chaired by Denise Cahill, Healthy Cities Co-ordinator, Cork City, and rapporteur provided by Dr Lizzy Pinkerton, Scheme Manager, Belfast Hills Partnership and Belfast Healthy Cities Board of Directors.

Participants of the breakout room discussion were asked to consider:

1. **What are the key things that struck you about the presentations?**
2. **What are the key challenges to support joined up action for greening and health in Belfast?**
3. **How do we begin to address these issues, so that Belfast has greener, more inclusive and mutually beneficial environments for everyone?**

Participants discussed the barriers that needed to be overcome, who needs to be involved, and how Belfast Healthy Cities can support the agenda.

Key challenges to address were:

- Understanding who needs to be involved to lead the agenda.
- Issues of insurance and land ownership.
- How to get buy in from local people?
- How to ensure these interventions are delivered?

Opportunities to consider include:

- Recognising the importance of a coordinator to get buy in from people and communities.
- Involving key partners such as Belfast City Council and Northern Ireland Housing Executive.

- Bringing all partners together, including NGOs and the education sector.
- Ensuring all partners have the opportunity to shape greening for health projects and programmes, and are supported to understand each other's perspectives and find common agendas, such as place making.
- Learning lessons from good case studies such as Connswater Community Greenway, which demonstrates changed perceptions of people, the importance of champions to promote the space, and that change takes time and patience.

Room 3 'What is needed to empower communities to shape and use green and blue spaces?'

The discussion was chaired by Joan Devlin, Belfast Healthy Cities, and rapporteur provided by Linda Armitage, East Belfast Community Development Association and Belfast Healthy Cities Board of Directors.

1. **What are the key things that struck you about the presentations?**
2. **What are the key challenges to empowering communities to shape and use green and blue spaces?**
3. **How do we begin to address these issues, so that Belfast has greener, more inclusive and mutually beneficial environments for everyone?**

Reflections from the presentation were:
- The requirement for community buy in and engagement.
- Recognition of needing evidence, but also developing this alongside delivering action.
- Importance of having a green coordinator and of taking a community development approach.

Key challenges raised were:

- Issues of land ownership.
- How to recognise and harness the leadership that is in communities?
- How to address negative attitudes from different stakeholders, in particular links between anti –social behaviour and green spaces?

Opportunities to consider include:

- Providing education to all sectors on how to deliver greener spaces in practice.
- Challenging peoples' mind-set, and providing meaningful community engagement.
- Working across sectors, rather than in silos.

Closing Comment

Joan Devlin, Chief Executive, Belfast Healthy Cities, provided a summary of the greening for health in Belfast webinar and outlined the next steps for the greening the city programme are to develop an action plan and cross sector working group. Attendees were encouraged to read the findings of the greening the city scoping exercise available here: https://belfasthealthycities.com/greening-city, and to continue to be involved with the development of the programme, with those interested in joining a working group to email aranvir@belfasthealthycities.com.

PROGRAMME

Webinar: Greening for Health in Belfast
Date: Tuesday 29 March 2022
Time: 12.00 pm–13.30 pm
Online via Zoom

This lunchtime webinar will discuss how we can make Belfast greener to improve health, wellbeing and reduce inequalities. Belfast Healthy Cities Strategic Plan sets out 'greening the city' as a key programme for the organisation to deliver during Phase VII (2020-2025) of the WHO European Healthy Cities Network to support the themes of People, Place, Planet, Prosperity, Participation and Peace. The overall goal of the programme is to create mutually beneficial relationships between citizens and the urban environment for improved physical and mental wellbeing.

The webinar will set out the findings of an evidence review and discussions with stakeholders to explore opportunities to develop the agenda moving forward. Speakers from Belfast City Council and Cork Healthy Cities will share their experience and ideas, and provide an opportunity for you to engage with these discussions and shape the programme.

12.00 pm   **Welcome and Context**
Carol Ramsey, Belfast Healthy Cities Board of Directors

12.10 pm   **Greening the City Programme**
Aranvir Singh Gawera, Programme Officer, Belfast Healthy Cities

12.20 pm   **Greening and Health in Belfast**
Mark Whittaker, Senior Planning Officer, Belfast City Council

12.30/35 pm **Supporting joined up action for greening and health**
Denise Cahill, Healthy Cities Co-ordinator, Cork City

12.45 pm   **Panel Discussion**
Question and answer session with speakers

12: 55 pm   **Breakout Discussions - Challenges and Opportunities**
Room 1 'What is needed to build capacity across sectors to support greening and health in Belfast?'
Room 2 'What is needed to support joined up action for greening and health in Belfast?'
Room 3 'What is needed to empower communities to shape and use green and blue spaces?'

1.15 pm   **Feedback from discussions**
Carol Ramsey, Belfast Healthy Cities Board of Directors

1.25pm   **Close**
Joan Devlin, Chief Executive, Belfast Healthy Cities