



Belfast Healthy Cities response to Valuing Nature- Consultation on a Biodiversity Strategy for Northern Ireland to 2020

Belfast Healthy Cities welcomes the opportunity to comment on the strategy.

Belfast- A World Health Organization Healthy City

Belfast has been a leading member of the World Health Organization (WHO) European Healthy Cities Network for the past 25 years, through five WHO phases with a strong track record of meeting WHO goals and objectives. The network has 100 member cities.

Belfast Healthy Cities (BHC) office has a staff team dedicated to working with partner organisations and key stakeholders across the city, to deliver on the WHO requirements on behalf of Belfast as a WHO Healthy City. The office also acts as the link between the city and WHO and BHC currently provides the secretariat to the WHO European Healthy Cities Network.

Key partners include Belfast City Council, Belfast Health and Social Care Trust, Northern Ireland Housing Executive and the Public Health Agency, as well as Departments including DOE, DHSSPS and DSD as well as the University of Ulster and Queen's University Belfast.

The role of the organisation is through leadership and innovation, to inspire and utilise the collective and individual strengths of partners to deliver the WHO European Healthy City goals and requirements and maximise their impact on health and inequalities. The focus of the global Healthy Cities movement is on the wider physical and social living conditions that shape health and wellbeing and creating conditions that support health and tackle inequalities.

A key aspect of being a Healthy City is the sharing of innovative and good practice from throughout the WHO European region.

Healthy Urban Environments

Healthy urban environments has been a core theme of the Healthy Cities movement since the early 2000s. The focus of this area of work is to explore the impact that the physical environment has on health and wellbeing, and identify ways in which policy and practice on the physical environment can also support health and wellbeing. A key principle is that policies that support healthy people and communities also tend to support a healthy environment and that this often also brings economic benefits.

Belfast Healthy Cities facilitates the Climate Change and Health Partnership, a regional group led by the Department of Health, Social Services and Personal Safety. It also supports the Regeneration and Healthy Urban Environment (RHUE) working group, which has a dual mandate, delivering on the WHO core theme of Healthy Urban Environment (HUE) and on the regeneration theme for Belfast Strategic Partnership. Belfast Healthy Cities is also represented on the Urban Biodiversity Working Group.

Health and Biodiversity

Belfast Healthy Cities is pleased to see a clear understanding of the link between human health and wellbeing and biodiversity.

Health 2020, the WHO Europe public health strategy takes an approach that population health outcomes are influenced by a range of physical and social determinants and highlights the importance of creating environments that support health.¹ Increasingly, it is accepted that well designed and effectively managed urban features can support health in many ways.

While urban settings generally do not have the physical resources that are found in the countryside and are under greater stress due to population congestion and environmental pollution, they still have many valuable natural assets that protected and developed could contribute to a healthier environment.

Green and naturally diverse spaces in themselves are particularly valuable to health in urban settings in that they support mental wellbeing by offering space for relaxation and stress relief, in addition to encouraging physical activity and sport. Recent research from the University of Exeter suggests that increasing green spaces in cities could deliver substantial benefits to public health.²

Additionally, Belfast Healthy Cities believes that investment in urban biodiversity will also potentially to deliver a range of co-benefits, including to

- connect people with their community and contribute to better social cohesion
- improve resilience to climate change and other environmental factors that impact on health
- increase opportunities for physical activity that also benefit health
- generate income, through local enterprise (developing unique character) and tourism

¹ Health 2020: a European policy framework, 2013, WHO Regional Office for Europe.

² Longitudinal Effects on Mental Health of Moving to Greener and Less Green Urban Areas, European Centre for Environment and Human Health, University of Exeter Medical School, published in Environmental Science and Technology, January 2014

Strategic Priorities

Belfast Healthy Cities welcomes reference to wellbeing in the proposed strategic vision. This offers a helpful basis for identifying and developing action that promotes both human wellbeing and biodiversity, which can generate significant synergies. Belfast Healthy Cities also welcomes the focus on eco system services and in particular, the Natural Capital Framework, which offers a very helpful asset based approach to action. Belfast Healthy Cities would be pleased to support work in this field, should that be helpful.

However, Belfast Healthy Cities would welcome a specific strategic priority focusing on urban biodiversity to provide clarity on the value of nature within the city environment and serve as focus for targeted actions. It would also be helpful to clearly state options and opportunities for linking the strategy with other forthcoming strategies, in particular the SPPS, which will fundamentally shape land use for the foreseeable future. Belfast Healthy Cities would welcome, and will encourage, a focus within the SPPS on safeguarding and promoting natural space as part of development, with a view to strengthening biodiversity as well as human wellbeing.

Belfast Healthy Cities believes that it is appropriate to identify a focused set of targets and key actions, in order to achieve substantial progress. It would be helpful, however, to identify relevant partners more clearly. For example, local government and NIHE as substantial urban landowners should be identified as partners with specific roles. The health sector can also contribute, for example by providing relevant health information and data.

A key role for Belfast Healthy Cities is sharing learning through the WHO European Healthy Cities Network, and Belfast Healthy Cities would be pleased to support this strategy with relevant evidence, should that be helpful. Please see Appendix 1 for a sample outline of the type of evidence that can be shared .

Belfast Healthy Cities also facilitates the Climate Change and Health partnership, a regional, cross-sectoral group whose work focuses on the health impacts of climate change. It is a key area of concern within the HUE agenda reflecting that the World Health Organization has identified 'climate change as 'the defining issue for health systems in the 21st century'.³ To date, the group has taken a focus on adaptation, specifically in relation to potential effects for the health sector. Belfast Healthy Cities would be pleased to explore further synergies between this work and the biodiversity strategy.

Belfast Healthy Cities believes the biodiversity strategy presents an opportunity to create synergies across existing and developing strategies including, but not limited to, the areas of health, planning and community development.

³ Climate Change and Health: Impacts, Inequalities and Action- A guide for professionals in Northern Ireland 2010, Belfast Healthy Cities

An essential element of making this happen is the effective engagement of stakeholders across sectors, to ensure that full use is made of existing knowledge, skills and assets to inform the development of new approaches.

The NI Biodiversity Group is a potential vehicle to facilitate this and should have as diverse a membership as possible, reflecting the wide range of organisations and agencies with an interest in biodiversity and a contribution to make to delivering better outcomes.

This group's remit could include mapping existing capacity, the identification of key synergies between strategies and organisations, and the development of specific actions in order to create an environment of cross-sectoral collaboration and foster creative approaches to safeguarding biodiversity.

Appendix 1. Relevant evidence

Role of Communities

The role of communities is also important, the document rightly highlights that many feel passionate about wild environments, equally; many communities already see the value of improving the quality of urban settings by encouraging wildlife. Increasing awareness of how better biodiversity enhances the built environment could enhance the benefits of emerging community planning and asset based approaches. The Belfast City Council 'Growing Communities' Strategy⁴, which was supported in its development stage by Belfast Healthy Cities, highlights how of a 'grow your own' approach in an urban setting could deliver a range of benefits, including increasing biodiversity, improving health and contribute to greater community cohesion.

Children and young people also have a contribution to make to improving biodiversity and sustaining actions through future generations. The 'Shaping Healthier Neighbourhoods for Children'⁵ model, which was developed by Belfast Healthy Cities has supported children from primary schools across Belfast to explore their neighbourhoods and suggest how they could be improved. One of the main outcomes of the projects activities to date has been evidence that children value the green spaces in their neighbourhood and want to be involved in maintaining and improving them.

Belfast Healthy Cities welcomes the recognition that education and capacity building at all levels are an important aspect of strengthening actions to deliver the strategy

⁴ Growing Communities- A Citywide Strategy for Belfast 2012 – 2022, 2012, Belfast City Council

⁵ Shaping Healthier Neighbourhoods for Children, 2011, Belfast Healthy Cities

Delivering Co-Benefits

As with other key issues identified in the strategy, there are significant synergies between health, environmental protection and the economy; actions can deliver towards many objectives across sectors.⁶ There is evidence that access to high quality, healthy environments supports climate change action, increases opportunities for physical activity, producing better health outcomes.

For example, an international survey found that more than half of reporting cities (55%) are undertaking emissions reduction actions that promote walking and cycling, which directly and indirectly lead to improved public health.⁷

Physical Activity

Evidence from WHO shows that environmental policies that increase public space for recreational activities also have the potential to increase physical activity levels in the population and consequently provide significant health benefits⁸.

Across the European Healthy Cities network, initiatives have been developed that encourage people to think differently about how they can use the physical environment to improve health. While increasing biodiversity may not be their primary intention, they do focus on improving quality of place.

For example, in Brighton and Hove, a strategic partnership was formed to increase levels of physical activity by making use of the area's considerable natural assets, involving a range of organisations including local professional and amateur sports clubs.

Another initiative in the city of Dresden, Germany will support the development of a network of walking trails within underused areas, improving the quality of the environment by making people aware of its natural assets. Participants will be involved in the design of the trails and make choices about what they feel will improve the fabric of the environment..

Models like these that engage a range of stakeholders could be developed to incorporate actions, which address biodiversity more directly, providing an opportunity to improve awareness and involve communities in stewardship of the environment.

⁶ Climate Change and Health: Impacts, Inequalities and Action- A guide for professionals in Northern Ireland 2010, Belfast Healthy Cities

⁷ Wealthier, Healthier Cities, 2011, CDP

⁸ Global Recommendations on Physical Activity for Health, 2010, WHO

Air Quality

While overall air quality has improved, there are still significant issues for people living in urban areas. Exposure to high levels of pollutants tends to impact disproportionately on less affluent neighbourhoods in urban areas, particularly when housing or workplaces are sited close to busy roads or industrial premises.

While strategies at a national and European level to address this issue in the long term are essential, improved biodiversity could contribute supplementary improvements for urban environments and the people who live and work there. These actions could be led by agencies from any sector or in partnership between sectors. For instance, Transport for London have installed a number of 'green walls', constructed from a variety of plant species to absorb pollutants as has the Skainos Community Resource Centre in East Belfast,

Evaluation of the London scheme concluded that the absorption ability of the installation varied greatly depending on species, and should be used in conjunction with other emission reduction methods. However, it did note that its effectiveness should be viewed in the 'context of wider environmental benefits' including biodiversity gains and aesthetic value.⁹

Contribution to Prosperity/Development of Place.

High levels of biodiversity could also contribute to increased prosperity in urban settings. There is evidence that proximity to green space increases property values and can enhance productivity among workers.

There are also links to culture, tradition and identity that can promote a sense of belonging amongst the people of a city, which, in turn can enhance the overall quality of the city. The WHO Europe Healthy City of Łódź, Poland has developed an programme 'the green ring of tradition and culture', an integrated programme that addresses environmental issues promotes healthy planning considerations, but also goes further encouraging people to think about their history and engendering a sense of pride in the city. The plan has expanded to include a social enterprise, selling Łódź branded products that celebrate the biodiversity and culture of the city. It is an example of how an integrated approach can address a range of issues and deliver a range of benefits.

⁹ Public Health and Landscape: Creating healthy places, 2013, Landscape Institute.