

Bolton Council's Greenspace Strategy

2026-2041



**Bolton
Council**



Foreword

Bolton has a wide range of excellent public green spaces where people can relax, enjoy nature, take children to play or take part in sport or recreation and they are essential for the health and well-being of the borough.



Public parks and green spaces have many benefits and have been shown to make positive contributions to climate change, social cohesion, clean air, culture, wildlife, local history, biodiversity and the economy.

I am proud of the fantastic parks, woodlands, playing fields, nature reserves and other green spaces in Bolton and would like to express my gratitude to the volunteers, partner organisations and staff for all the work they do to maintain and improve them.

This strategy sets out how Bolton Council will manage our parks and green spaces over the next 15 years to build on the excellent provision we already have. I am really looking forward to seeing it implemented to ensure that our public open spaces remain safe, protected and accessible for all residents and visitors, and for future generations.

Cllr Richard Silvester

Executive Cabinet Member,
Climate Change and Environment

1. Introduction

1.1. The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) 2025 defines green infrastructure as, “A network of multi-functional green and blue spaces and other natural features, urban and rural, which is capable of delivering a wide range of environmental, economic, health and wellbeing benefits for nature, climate, local and wider communities and prosperity.”

1.2. Green and Blue infrastructure extends across the borough boundaries: the moorlands form part of the West Pennine Moors area extending into Chorley, Blackburn with Darwen and Bury districts; the Irwell Valley extends into Bury and Salford; and lowland agricultural areas extend into Salford, Wigan and Chorley. Green and Blue Infrastructure is a strategic issue which crosses such boundaries, and this involves several partners, for example Environment Agency, Natural England, adjoining boroughs and community groups. Within local authorities, Green and Blue Infrastructure also crosses several areas of the council, for example planning, transport, parks, open spaces and the visitor economy. Therefore, collaborative working with partners and internal teams is crucial for improving the green infrastructure network both within Bolton and Greater Manchester as a whole.

1.3. Natural England states that green infrastructure should be “designed and managed as a multifunctional resource capable of delivering a wide range of environmental and quality of life benefits for local communities”. This strategy will help to support nature recovery by providing a vision and framework for Green and Blue Infrastructure developed in consultation with key stakeholders. It establishes Green and Blue Infrastructure as of equal importance to ‘grey’ infrastructure and the built environment and will help to bring consideration of Green and Blue Infrastructure to the forefront of planning decisions in the borough.

1.4. This strategy has several themes, and certain priorities are cross-cutting as they can deliver on more than one theme. This document is part of a wider focus on how the borough will develop and deliver these essential ecosystem services that benefit both people and nature and also the borough commitment to the Active Lives Strategy, which aims to create health supporting environments. Much of Bolton’s Green and Blue Infrastructure is also designated for its nature conservation value, from trees to bumblebees, these spaces host a range of biodiversity which provide local communities with opportunities to encounter wildlife daily. As such, The Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006, as amended by the 2021 Environment Act, gives public bodies the duty to conserve and enhance biodiversity. This strategy summarises the current state of biodiversity in the borough, develops projects to conserve and enhance local biodiversity and builds opportunities and indicators for the council to use to direct our impact for the longer term. The strategy relates to all green and blue infrastructure across the borough, including parks, nature reserves, playing fields, woodlands, cemeteries and roadside greenspace.

2. Vision

2.1 The delivery of green infrastructure, alongside social and physical infrastructure, is integral to Bolton's plan to ensure growth is sustainable. The strategy reflects the important and varied roles that Green and Blue Infrastructure plays within Bolton and the importance of protecting and enhancing green space for the borough's health, wealth and well-being.

Bolton's Green Spaces continuously contributing to the enhancement of life for our communities where the ecosystem benefits of local spaces are safeguarded, protected and accessible for all.

The council wants to encourage collaboration and co-production with local users and partner organisations to ensure existing and future infrastructure reflects the needs of communities and biodiversity throughout the borough.

Aims

- Establishing minimum standards of Green and Blue Infrastructure provision to ensure that Bolton has infrastructure which safeguards, enhances, restores, expands and connects existing local habitats and green spaces to meet the needs of existing and future generations.
- Ensuring that priority is given to improving local access to good quality green space and to providing more opportunities to enjoy nature, especially in areas of the borough which need it the most.
- Achieving high quality Green and Blue Infrastructure within Bolton, including those spaces which are recognised for their quality or features.
- Prioritising the importance of local Green and Blue Infrastructure and its contribution to urban planning, physical health/wellbeing and local biodiversity.
- Encouraging and supporting community stewardship of local Green and Blue Infrastructure.
- Delivering a high-quality network of recreational and accessible Green and Blue Infrastructure linking Bolton to the wider ecological network and growing the visitor economy.
- Overall, Bolton will have a network of green and blue spaces, where the multifunctional benefits of green and blue infrastructure are recognised, promoted and managed sustainably. Ensuring the aims mentioned above integrate and align with strategic policies stated within Bolton's Core Strategy, especially CG1 (Cleaner and Greener), CG2 (Sustainable Design and Construction) and CG3 (The Built Environment).





3. Bolton's Natural Environment

3.1. Greater Manchester declared a biodiversity emergency in 2022 and in March 2024, Greater Manchester's first [State of Nature report](#) highlighted the scale of the problem. It states that key species of birds and mammals within the region are declining. Approximately 11% of the Greater Manchester region comprises protected areas, the majority of which are highly fragmented. Our waterbodies are heavily modified by human activities, with many of our rivers not in good ecological condition. Tree canopy cover makes up 16% of the region, with many of our woodlands in need of better management for local biodiversity. Our natural environment is in decline, and it is a major resource which has delivered an estimated £1bn worth of multiple benefits such as carbon sequestration, air quality and wellbeing.

3.2. An estimated third of Greater Manchester's population do not live within 15 minutes of green space. Only an estimated 40% of the region's population reside within 200m of 0.5ha or bigger greenspace, whilst an estimated 30% of the region's population reside within 300m of a 2ha green space. Assessment of local trends suggests that generally those in more diverse communities are nearly twice as likely to live in areas with the least amount of green space.

3.3. Bolton lies in the north-west of Greater Manchester, bordering on Lancashire, and ranges from relatively flat land in the south, to the high moorland of the West Pennine Moors in the north, which rises to a height of 444m above sea level at Winter Hill. The borough also lies at an intersection within three National Character Areas (NCAs). These comprise, the Southern Pennines (NE323), Manchester Pennine Fringe (NE397) and Lancashire Coal Measures (NE436).

3.4. Despite nearly half of the borough being urban land, significant areas of UK Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) priority habitats remain. This includes magnificent upland Oak woods such as Gale Clough and Shooterslee Wood SSSI. A significant proportion of the county's moorland (upland heath and blanket bog) is found in Bolton, which looks stunning in August when the heather is in bloom. The borough holds the highest proportion of scrub in the county, and the second highest proportion of semi-improved neutral grassland. Bolton has important areas of bog, especially at Red Moss SSSI, where recent restoration work by the Lancashire Wildlife Trust has resulted in the reappearance of Sundew. There are also numerous ponds, canals, lodges and reservoirs, all contributing to the diverse range of habitats. Nob End SSSI supports an unusual (for Greater Manchester) collection of plant species because of its alkaline substrate, present due to historic industrial activity.

3.5. Three species of newt, as well as Common Frog and Common Toad, breed in the borough's ponds and lodges. Mammals to be seen in Bolton include Badger, Roe Deer, as well as ferocious predators, Stoat and Weasel. Otters are starting to return to the rivers and brooks, and hopefully will increase in numbers over the next few years. Specialist moorland birds, such as Curlew, Raven, Golden Plover and Wheatear can be seen in the upland areas. Many species of rare plants, not recorded elsewhere in Greater Manchester, are found in Bolton, including Carline Thistle, Oak Fern, Vervain, Water-purslane and several species of Bog Moss (Sphagnum). Seven species of bat have been recorded, many of these roost in buildings in urban areas. Dragonflies and damselflies frequent the ponds and streams, adding a splash of colour in late summer, and many species of butterfly can be seen on the wing on sunny days.

3.6. The Greater Manchester Local Record Centre (GMLRC), managed by the Greater Manchester Ecology Unit (GMEU), is responsible for local ecological data in Bolton and the rest of Greater Manchester. It collects, verifies, safeguards and shares records relating to species, habitats and sites designated as having local, national and international conservation value.

3.7. The biodiversity interest of the borough is recognised in various site designations which receive some protection from policies within the Core Strategy.



4. Strategic Priorities

Safe Open Spaces

4.1. As stated within the borough's Core Strategy, "a contributory factor to improving safety is to create and sustain a sense of place that enables people to identify with their surroundings or locality". In the year ending June 2025, the crime rate in Bolton was lower than average for the Greater Manchester force area. The borough had a lower crime rate compared to Oldham, Rochdale, Salford and Manchester. With a higher rate compared to boroughs such as Trafford, Stockport, Bury, Wigan and Tameside.

4.2. Estimates from the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) for the year ending September 2023 showed that 34% of people had experienced or witnessed some type of anti-social behaviour (ASB), similar to the year ending September 2022 (35%). Even though there was an 8% decrease in reported ASB incidents compared to 2022. The CSEW estimated that 24% of people perceived ASB to be a fairly or very big problem in their local area (general measure) compared with 8% of people who perceived their local area to have a high level of ASB.

4.3. The council would like to reduce local ASB and related criminal damage within its green space assets. The council intends to monitor our sites and engage with residents to address such issues and hope to encourage and raise awareness of the implications such behaviour may have on local biodiversity and neighbourhoods. This is a key priority for the council and is to be integrated into future planning and investment, alongside ensuring that our deliverables for this strategy support and strengthen a sense of pride and safety within our local spaces. The council will implement a Safe Parks programme, working with GMP, enforcement agencies and communities to ensure our green spaces feel safe and accessible for everyone who wants to use them.

Protected for All

4.4. The way the council decides to use land, organise and design development is key to bringing nature into all communities and securing its benefits. This includes increasing the provision of high-quality green spaces within new and existing developments, but also protecting, maintaining and enhancing existing locally valued green infrastructure. The presence of green infrastructure in built-up areas is clearly associated with heat reduction, flood prevention, carbon storage and nature's recovery.



4.5. Encouraging stewardship of local spaces in both urban and rural areas, supports the enhancement and regeneration of nature and biodiversity as well as indirect benefits for both people and wildlife. Nature is vital for all of us, we have an invested interest in the protection of local assets and working together can result in leaving nature in a better state than we found it for our future generations.

4.6. The purpose of this priority is to encourage a safe and protective sense of feeling within local spaces for neighbourhoods within Bolton. These areas invigorate local communities, encourage wildlife and support healthy activities. The council would like to encourage a sense of community and belonging within such spaces, ensuring there is a strong emphasis on community interest and environmental protection.

4.7. The council will work to minimise the spread and impact of invasive non-native species (INNS) across the borough, focusing on the most harmful and high-risk infestations, including Japanese Knotweed, Giant Hogweed and, where justified by location and ecological impact, Himalayan Balsam. To deliver a coordinated, evidence-based programme, we will establish an INNS working group with community organisations and private landowners to align activity across the council's estate, share best practice, map infestations and enable collaborative action that contributes to long-term control and, where achievable, eradication.

Equal Access to Space

4.8. Access is also not just about how far you live from a park. Feeling safe and welcome can be just as significant. Young people, older people, women and girls, and people from the global majority are more likely to experience verbal or physical harassment in public places. Simply creating a new park, or allowing access to an existing natural area, does not mean everyone will be able to enjoy it. People in dense urban areas are also among the most isolated from nature. Diverse communities and people living on low incomes are also more likely to live in areas without accessible or high-quality green spaces or parks.



4.9. To enhance equal access to our local assets, the council endeavours to identify and assess access to green space by different socio-economic groups, ensuring access for vulnerable groups are prioritised. As well as supporting the development of urban community gardens to incentivise adoption of healthier dietary habits, encouraging the health benefits of urban green space are well recognised for children, whose physical and mental development is enhanced by living, playing and learning in green environments. The priority is to target action to reduce barriers to access by involving communities in the design and management of green space to foster a sense of ownership and promote use and enjoyment.

5. Key Themes and Objectives

5.1. To establish green and blue infrastructure principles and policy recommendations to achieve the vision, this chapter of the strategy first explores different themes within the borough. Key themes provide a useful framework to understand and plan for green and blue infrastructure within the borough.

Communities

5.2. Community involvement in the management and development of green spaces is vital and, to achieve the long-term aims and objectives of this strategy, community support and interest will need to be maintained over the years ahead. Community involvement is also important so that green spaces serve the needs of all in the community and are valued by the community. The council is actively working towards encouraging stewardship and co-production by leveraging the strengths and resources of communities to enhance the development, use and management of greenspaces. An approach on community led initiatives, collaboration and sustainability recognises that the people who live near or use the space are the best people to care for it. The benefits of this approach include increased community ownership, improved health and wellbeing and stronger community cohesion.

The council will ensure that allotments and community gardens across the borough are managed in a way that maximises food security and supports community wellbeing. Working together, the council, plot holders and allotment associations will maintain productive sites supported by clear management arrangements, charging structures and effective monitoring programmes. Administrative processes will be simplified and modern monitoring systems introduced so that vacant plots can be identified quickly and offered to new tenants without delay

OBJECTIVE: To support wider community involvement in local parks and green spaces.

Biodiversity and Offsetting

5.3. The 2021 Environment Act places a new duty on Local Planning Authorities to require a 10% increase in biodiversity value from new development which requires planning permission. The Places for Everyone Plan (adopted March 2024), (which is a long-term plan of the nine Greater Manchester Districts for jobs, new homes and sustainable growth), to also include a policy requiring Biodiversity Net Gain. Whilst, the Greater Manchester Ecology Unit has undertaken a Needs and Supply Assessment for each GM district, the assessment estimates the potential off-site BNG need resulting from development in the borough, and the potential supply of BNG units on Council-owned land. The Council has used this to identify a number of potential council-owned receptor sites across the Borough for biodiversity net gain and will utilise this evidence to inform future work surrounding Biodiversity Net Gain.

5.4. Natural England has developed an Urban Greening Factor for England, as one of a suite of five headline Green Infrastructure Standards within the Green Infrastructure Framework – Principles and Standards for England. The Urban Greening Factor (UGF) is a planning tool to improve the provision of Green Infrastructure (GI) particularly in urban areas. It is voluntary and can be used to increase urban greening and contribute to Biodiversity Net Gain. The Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) in partnership with Manchester City Council have applied this to the city region via [Places for Everyone](#)



5.5. Carbon offsets operate as part of planning policies that require a reduction in carbon emissions beyond that required by Building Regulations. The offset payments pay for carbon saving projects to go ahead elsewhere, to make up for the carbon savings not achieved within developments. Carbon offsets are collected through “Section 106” legal agreements attached to planning consents, and off-site carbon abatement is assumed to take place over a 30-year period. With Greater Manchester’s ambition to become carbon neutral by 2038, interest from companies in domestic offsets, and a major need for restoration of Greater Manchester’s carbon sink landscapes, Greater Manchester Environment Fund is seeking to develop business models based on income generated by voluntary carbon credits.

OBJECTIVE: To improve understanding and awareness of biodiversity, offsetting opportunities and integrating this within council decision-making processes.

Local Nature Recovery

5.6. Section 102 of The Environment Act (general duty to conserve and enhance biodiversity) sets out that Local Planning Authorities will need to have regard to the Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS) in local planning policy and decisions. The purpose of the Greater Manchester LNRS is to develop a more liveable region, fairer access to green space and identify important areas for people and wildlife. In addition to, identifying opportunities to establish a new network for nature that connects people to green space throughout the region. [Our plan for nature recovery - Greater Manchester Combined Authority](#)

OBJECTIVE: To support with nature recovery in alignment with regional and national objectives and targets, prioritising safety, protection and accessibility for both people and wildlife.

Landscape, Culture and the Visitor Economy

5.7. National Character Areas are essential profiles for wider landscape characteristics. Bolton falls within three National Character Areas including the Southern Pennines (NE323), Manchester Pennine Fringe (NE397) and Lancashire Coal Measures (NE436). Each profile includes a description of the natural and cultural features that shape our landscapes, how the landscape has changed over time, the current key drivers for ongoing change, and a broad analysis of each area's characteristics and ecosystem services. Statements of Environmental Opportunity (SEOs) are suggested, which draw on this integrated information. The SEOs offer guidance on the critical issues, which could help to achieve sustainable growth, including in the visitor economy, and a more secure environmental future.

OBJECTIVE: To ensure statements of environmental opportunities (SEOs) are considered within future land management, development planning, council decision-making, future nature recovery and conservation.

Ecosystem Services

5.8. Ecosystem services describe the flow of benefits which we gain from this natural capital. E.g., a woodland is a natural capital asset, from which the ecosystem services of supplying wood fuel, reducing water run-off and providing a peaceful retreat can be gained. Ecosystem services are divided into provisioning services, regulating services, supporting services and cultural services. Provisioning services provide products such as food or water. Regulating services regulate a natural process to our advantage, such as reducing flooding or air quality. Supporting services provide services to help other ecosystem services function such as photosynthesis and soil formation. Cultural services provide non-material benefits essential to our health and wellbeing such as sense of place, recreation and aesthetic quality.

OBJECTIVE: To identify essential and priority services for the borough alongside improving and safeguarding local ecosystems, and biodiversity.

Health and Wellbeing

5.9. There is a wealth of evidence to suggest that making parks and green spaces engaging, exciting and reflective of the communities around them will increase use of them so more people will benefit in terms of health and wellbeing and social cohesion outcomes. Regular exercise, including walking, has been proved to improve physical and mental health significantly. These benefits apply to children and adults and align with the general strategy of the council to make our public spaces family friendly. Increasingly, social prescribing is enabling people to access activities such as walking in green spaces – options that are free, easy to engage with, and proven to support better health and wellbeing. This approach is particularly beneficial for people experiencing poor mental health, mobility challenges, or excess weight, as it promotes increased physical activity while also strengthening their connection to people and place. Play is a key element in increasing the fitness of children and adults. The range of green spaces and play spaces within Bolton provides opportunities to meet a large range of different interests – it is not just about sport but a wider interpretation of leisure and activity such as growing food, walking, play and accessing nature.

These ambitions are reflected nationally in the [Sport England strategy](#) and regionally within the [Greater Manchester Moving Strategy](#), as well as being delivered locally via the Active Lives Strategy.

OBJECTIVE: To work with health partners to investigate, assess and promote new and existing ways in which green space can be used to improve the health and wellbeing of Bolton's communities.

Climate and Sustainability

5.10. In the UK, we are already experiencing a changing climate, and as the climate continues to warm it will bring an increased chance of warmer, wetter winters, hotter, drier summers and more incidents of extreme weather events such as heatwaves and flooding.

Urban areas such as towns and cities experience higher temperatures than rural areas due to the urban heat island effect. Built up urban areas have large amounts of tarmac, concrete and other dark surfaces that absorb heat during the day and release it at night. Combined with less green spaces and vegetation and heat emitting from buildings and transport, densely populated city areas can be up to 12°C warmer than the surrounding countryside.

In urban areas, trees and plants absorb carbon dioxide, provide shade and reduce surface temperatures by evapotranspiration (acting as air filters capturing harmful pollutants by trapping them in their leaves and bark).

Green spaces help combat climate change by absorbing carbon dioxide, reducing the risk of flooding, and improving air quality. Peatlands, such as Red Moss near Horwich, are especially important as they are one of the most carbon rich ecosystems on earth. Restoring peatlands, helps to store carbon, improve water quality and regulate water flow.

Climate change is likely to mean more frequent and intense extreme weather, including incidences of flooding. Green spaces can help reduce flood risks by contributing to flood alleviation by storing and slowing down water flow, reducing the volume of runoff and by allowing rainfall to be absorbed into the soil.

OBJECTIVE: To enhance and improve urban green spaces to mitigate climate impacts such as urban heat risk, flood risk and surface water run-off vulnerability, within core urban areas.

