

May 2008

Understanding the relevance and application of the Access to Natural Green Space Standard

**Prepared for
Natural England
by
Land Use Consultants**



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I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PURPOSE OF STUDY

- 1.1. In January 2008, Natural England commissioned Land Use Consultants (LUC) to undertake a study which considered the relevance and application of the Access to Natural Green Space Standards (ANGSt). The study addressed the following objectives:
- Review the current policy context relevant to Natural England's ANGSt;
 - Provide an up to date analysis of how the ANGSt have been incorporated into local authority green space strategies;
 - Evaluate the relevance of the ANGSt in the context of Natural England's position on accessible natural green space, and its corporate objective to foster: "*More people enjoying, understanding and acting to improve, the natural environment, more often*".¹
 - Identify ways in which Natural England can better encourage delivery of accessible natural green space, with particular regard to the potential of Local Area Agreements.

BACKGROUND

- 1.2. The context for ANGSt has changed considerably since its original development through English Nature Research Report 153². The Urban White Paper (2000) encouraged an urban renaissance reflecting the principles of sustainable development, and prompted several initiatives which promoted access to nature for urban residents. The *Cleaner, Safer, Greener* initiative is one example of this, and aimed to put high quality public open space at the heart of regeneration plans. Planning Policy Guidance Note 17 (PPG17): *Planning for open space, sport and recreation* was republished in 2002, and encourages all local authorities to complete an open space audit, assess demand for green space, and produce a strategy for open space provision. Over 90% of local authorities in the English regions now either has an open space strategy, or is in the process of developing one.
- 1.3. In 2006 the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act was the catalyst for the creation of Natural England, and defined the role of this new body in ensuring that the public enjoy, understand and connect with the natural environment. The same year saw the publication of the Local Government White Paper, which launched the concept of Local Strategic Partnerships (LSP) to ensure local priorities are recognised, and an important mechanism to deliver these priorities, the Local Area Agreement (LAA). Despite the green space opportunities introduced by this new legislation, many local authorities do not recognise, and are not acting to deliver accessible natural green space through the LSPs. As the government's advisor on nature conservation, Natural England should advise and support local authorities to

¹ Natural England (2007) 'Natural England's Strategic Direction'.

² Harrison et al. (1995). Accessible Natural Greenspace Standards in Towns and Cities: A Review of Appropriate Size and Distance Criteria. English Nature Research Report 153. Peterborough.

encourage the delivery of accessible natural green space through these new mechanisms.

- 1.4. A comprehensive discussion of the background to this study, and relevant policy is provided in **Section 2 and 3**.

CURRENT PRACTICE

- 1.5. In order to determine the current application of ANGSt in professional practice, twenty green space strategies from across the nine English regions were reviewed. A set of bespoke criteria were employed, and the findings recorded in an Access database. Of the total sample, four strategies were labelled as green infrastructure strategies, and the rest (16) were green space strategies, with the latter generally following the requirements of PPG17. The research revealed that the scope of green space and green infrastructure strategies varies considerably and that in reality the distinctions between the two are blurred. Review and consolidation of national guidance on this subject could help to reduce confusion and make the scope of future strategies more consistent.
- 1.6. The review provided insight into the extent to which ANGSt is currently being employed in professional practice, and the key mechanisms for delivery. The review indicated the many local authorities are not adopting ANGSt, whilst locally-derived distance standards are more popular, reflecting the approach promoted by PPG17. Concern about the applicability of ANGSt to rural and highly urbanised localities was raised by several local authority consultees. Some local authorities have adapted ANGSt based on the findings of local consultation, an approach supported by Natural England, although Natural England is keen to promote the 300m standard as a priority.
- 1.7. Several local authorities prioritised the improvement of green space quality, rather than quantity, and Natural England advocates this approach. The extent to which green space is being delivered through Local Area Agreements was of particular interest, although there was little evidence that this is occurring.
- 1.8. There is confusion in regard to the term *connectivity*, and the need to encourage an emotional connection between communities and local green space is not being addressed. ANGSt Plus defines 'connectivity' as both the physical ability of local residents to access natural green space, and also how equitable access to nature is for different socio-economic groups. Effective mechanisms for encouraging emotional connectivity with local green spaces include open days and other free events, local wardens to support access to nature by interacting with schools and community groups, and locating green spaces close to other community-focussed buildings where possible, to encourage links between the two. Strategies which recognised the need to encourage emotional connectivity between residents and their local green space include Bristol, Thetford and Wakefield.
- 1.9. Little evidence on the delivery of green space strategies was available from local authorities. It was unclear whether this was due to lack of delivery, or information being unavailable as monitoring of green space delivery had not been carried out. Local authority monitoring of the delivery of green space tends to occur every five years. Feedback from consultees indicated that, where green space targets are not

being delivered, this was due largely to lack of funding, lack of staff skilled in securing funding, and lack of knowledge of the mechanisms available for delivering green space.

- 1.10. Detailed analysis of the review of green space strategies is provided in **Section 4** of the report, with the full list of strategies reviewed provided as **Appendix 3**, and a copy of the review template provided as **Appendix 4**.

REVIEW OF 'ANGST PLUS'

- 1.11. Natural England's new assessment framework for ANGSt, known as 'ANGSt Plus' (see **Appendix I**), was appraised against a suite of bespoke criteria, which were designed to reflect Natural England's aspirations for ANGSt Plus, and the areas in which there is a clear need for guidance, as indicated through the review of existing strategies. The original ANGSt model was published specifically as a set of planning standards with which local authorities might assess the provision of accessible natural green space, whilst ANGSt Plus is simultaneously a method for implementing ANGSt and a technical planning standard.
- 1.12. The appraisal of ANGSt Plus highlighted a number of areas of further work within the new framework, including the potential for additional guidance on assessing quality, accessibility and 'connectivity'. In addition, this review identified considerable potential for Natural England to support ANGSt Plus through other actions. Key recommendations include inputting into an updated version of the CABE Space Green Space Strategy Guidance, the creation of guidance on the funding streams available to support delivery of access to nature, and a promotional document highlighting the multiple socio-economic and environmental benefits of accessible natural green space, and how its delivery can contribute to the achievement of national indicators.
- 1.13. Detailed findings of the 'ANGSt Plus' review are provided in **Section 5**.

SUMMARY OF CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1.14. This study has identified a number of important conclusions and recommendations on promotion and delivery of accessible natural green space, a summary of which is provided below. More detailed conclusions and recommendations are provided in **Section 6**.

Policy and guidance

- 1.15. There is currently a lack of guidance on both the treatment of access to nature in green space strategies, and on the scope of green infrastructure strategies. There is little guidance available on the effective implementation of green space proposals. Policy issues are discussed further in **Section 3**.

Recommendation: National policy framework

- Natural England should advocate and champion a national policy framework which clarifies how access to nature should be addressed at a national, regional and local level.

Box 4.1: Bristol Parks and Green Spaces Strategy:

The Bristol strategy conforms with PPG17 in analysing sites based on the uses they provide to the community, but it does not allocate a primary function to individual parks and open spaces, as recommended by the national guidance. Bristol City Council determined that it was not possible to categorise parks in terms of primary uses in many instances, and that to do so would underestimate the value of the resource and therefore be poor green space management. The strategy proposes overall distance and quantity standards for all green space, based on the assertion that it is relatively easy to change the management of sites to incorporate different functions and facilities. The open space database that supports the strategy divides parks and spaces into sections, accommodating different uses in different parts of each park. The Bristol strategy sets a distance standard for accessible natural green space at 700m. This distance was based on consultation with local communities, who were asked how far they thought it would be reasonable to travel to access different types of green space.

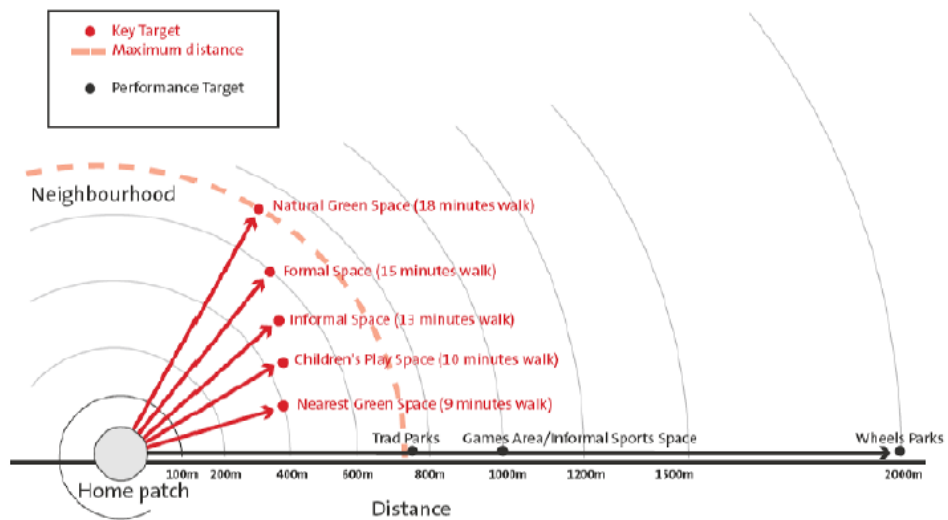


Fig. 4.1: Maximum distance standards for each green space type

MAPPING ACCESSIBLE NATURAL GREEN SPACE

- 4.15. There was some variability in how ANGSt was mapped. Some strategies quantified the provision of different green spaces according to the PPG17 green space typology.² Using this information the provision of Accessible Natural Green space was determined by quantifying the provision of 'natural and semi-natural green spaces' and 'green corridors'² (e.g. Walsall). Other strategies recognised that green spaces perform multiple purposes simultaneously, for example, 'amenity green spaces' may also contain accessible natural green space. This approach was employed by Bristol (see **Box 4.1.**)

