



URBAN NATURE PLANS +

**Participatory Planning and
Governance Indicators**





Participatory planning and governance

This short brief aims to help local authorities and others involved in the development of Urban Nature Plan (UNPs) to identify and use indicators for the effective monitoring of Participatory Planning and Governance (PP&G).

Key messages:

- 1. Urban Nature Plans should effectively engage people who live and work in cities or who have a stake in their management:** Participatory planning and governance approaches can make urban nature projects more targeted, fair, supported and sustainable, because the people who live in the city help design and manage them.
- 2. Indicators can be used to measure the effectiveness of this participation:** Whilst there are many potential indicators, it's often best to select a limited selection of those which appear best suited. An extensive list can be found in the NbS Handbook (European Commission, 2021a).
- 3. We suggest a shortlist of simple indicators¹:** these should provide clear benefits and be practical and easy to measure. Suggested indicators are i) diversity of stakeholders, ii) community involvement in planning/co-design iii) involvement of under-represented groups, iv) transparency of the participatory processes and v) reflexive monitoring.
- 4. Indicators can be measured through a number of simple techniques:** The most effective methods typically combine existing administrative data, digital participation analytics, short surveys, stakeholder mapping and simple tracking frameworks. This approach helps to keep monitoring simple, low-cost, repeatable and evidence-based.
- 5. There are a number of potential barriers to consider:** Barriers might include organisational silos, lack of interdepartmental communication, lack of expertise or resources and political sensitivities.

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¹ Based upon a co-production approach with UNP+ cities.



Introduction

Participatory planning and governance (PP&G) is a collaborative, democratic approach to planning whereby citizens, communities, and stakeholders actively engage in decision-making, planning, and management processes. Adopting a participatory planning and governance approach shifts planning from top-down management to inclusive, bottom-up methods, empowering local communities to engage directly in policy, project, and budget allocation.

In relation to Urban Nature Plans (UNPs), PP&G approaches are vital to ensure that renaturing is planned in a way that is locally contextualised and socially just. However, effective implementation also requires robust and effective monitoring to ensure that processes actually deliver the benefits that they are intended to and also include key groups and stakeholders.

“Citizen participation in environmental decision-making is extremely valuable, underscoring the importance of careful consideration of dynamic participation processes through all the stages of an urban greening project in order to harness the individual and collective empowering potential of participatory practices” (Feldman, R., Westphal, L.M, 1999)

Key Resources on PP&G

Van der Jagt, Alexander & Elands, Birgit & Ambrose-Oji, Bianca & Gerházi, Éva & Møller, Maja & Buizer, Marleen. (2016). *Participatory governance of urban green spaces: Trends and practices in the EU*. Nordic Journal of Architectural Research. 3. 11-39.

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/312554300_Participatory_governance_of_urban_green_spaces_Trends_and_practices_in_the_EU

Ambrose-Oji, Bianca & van der Jagt, Alexander & Stewart, Amy & Branquinho, Cristina & Buijs, Arjen & Buizer, Marleen & Delshammar, Tim & Elands, Birgit & Fors, Hanna & Geróházi, Éva & Hansen, Rieke & Havik, Gilles & Konijnendijk, Cecil & Nastran, Mojca & Pauleit, Stephan & Rall, Emily & Santos, Artur & Smith, Mike & Møller, Maja & Ambrose, Bianca. (2015). *The governance of urban green spaces in selected EU-cities*.

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/275246505_The_governance_of_urban_green_spaces_in_selected_EU-cities

Ambrose-Oji, Bianca & Buijs, Arjen & Geróházi, Éva & Mattijssen, Thomas & Száraz, Luca & van der Jagt, Alexander & Hansen, Rieke & Rall, Emily & Andersson, Erik & Kronenberg, Jakub & Rolf, Werner. (2017). *Innovative Governance for Urban Green Infrastructure: A Guide for Practitioners*.

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/320532612_Innovative_Governance_for_Urban_Green_Infrastructure_A_Guide_for_Practitioners



Why participatory planning and governance matters?

Urban areas face growing challenges such as heat stress, flooding, biodiversity loss, and declining access to greenspace. The UNP development process and the use of Nature-based Solutions approaches, such as urban forests, wetlands, green corridors and rain gardens, offer cost-effective ways to address these issues whilst improving overall environmental quality and human well-being. However, the success of these initiatives depends not only upon technical design capacity but also upon how planning and governance processes effectively engage people who live and work in cities.

Participatory planning and governance involves residents, community organisations, businesses, scientists, and public authorities working cooperatively to shape decisions about urban nature planning. By incorporating local knowledge, these approaches help to ensure that Urban Nature Plans reflect real community needs, local environmental conditions, and deliver robust societal benefits. Participation also fosters public support, encourages shared stewardship of green spaces and helps to ensure that benefits are distributed more equitably across neighbourhoods.

For local practitioners and policymakers, integrating participatory approaches into urban nature planning can lead to more effective, legitimate, and sustainable outcomes. When communities are actively involved in the design, implementation, and management of nature-based solutions, cities are better positioned to create resilient landscapes that deliver long-term benefits. Participatory planning makes urban nature projects more useful, fair, supported, and sustainable, because the people who live in the city help design and manage them. In particular, Participatory Planning and Governance approaches can provide the following tangible benefits:

Plans that reflect real local needs

Local people know their neighbourhoods best. When communities are involved, planners can gain insights into local greenspace conflicts, concerns over safety or where interventions might be best targeted to deliver the greatest benefits. For example, people might suggest an emphasis upon increasing the tree canopy to counter urban heat island impacts, enhancing blue infrastructure in places that flood often or improving the quality of parks where there is a deficit of greenspace and a high demand for recreation. This helps to target Nature-based Solutions to the locations and issues where they are most needed.

Better and more creative ideas

More innovative solutions can emerge when different groups contribute knowledge, local experience, specific expertise and diverse cultural perspectives. For instance, community gardening groups might advocate sustainable food production systems, local biodiversity experts can coordinate citizen science initiatives and city residents might help to identify



unused spaces as multifunctional green corridors and recreational spaces. Combining these ideas often leads to stronger urban nature projects which can deliver diverse benefits.

Stronger public support

If people participate in planning, they feel a sense of ownership towards initiatives. This makes them more likely to support proposals and less likely to voice opposition later on. For example, residents are more likely to be supportive of green infrastructure such as new parks, rain gardens or green streets when they have been actively involved in the design and planning of them. This reduces later conflicts and misunderstandings, but also can help ensure ongoing input from local people and interest groups.

Projects are better maintained

Community involvement often leads to long-term care of green spaces through creating a sense of stewardship and shared responsibility for the local environment. Residents may volunteer their time and energy, report problems or help out with the practical maintenance of gardens and trees. As a result, enhancements such as tree planting, habitat creation and development of community gardens are more likely to be successful and sustainable in the longer term. As well as ensuring effective investment in nature-based solutions, this can create additional social capital and can grow capacity for future initiatives.

Fairer and more inclusive outcomes

Participatory approaches can help to ensure that diverse groups, including disadvantaged and vulnerable people, can benefit from urban nature planning processes, which might otherwise favour people from privileged or wealthy neighbourhoods. This can avoid situations whereby greenspaces only serve the needs of affluent communities or where projects unintentionally displace lower-income residents through gentrification. When diverse communities participate, planners can identify and address potential social inequalities.

Builds trust between citizens and government.

Working together improves communication and transparency. Citizens are therefore more likely to understand how decisions are made and how they might help to influence these, resulting in higher levels of trust for local government institutions and departments. This clearly has far-reaching benefits and makes future urban initiatives easier to implement in the longer term. Collaboration and cocreation processes can also help to build social cohesion between diverse communities through achieving greater shared understanding.

Better long-term sustainability

Nature-based Solutions (such as green roofs, wetlands, urban forests and rain gardens) work best when they are locally accepted, understood and cared for by enthusiastic local people. Participation helps to ensure that solutions are socially, environmentally and economically sustainable.



Using indicators to measure participatory planning and governance

Whilst participatory planning and governance should be a key ambition in any city developing an Urban Nature Plan, for it to be effective, it needs to be implemented in a way that is holistic and inclusive. To evaluate whether this is the case in a city, it can be helpful to develop a suite of indicators to be used as key performance measures for participatory planning and governance activities.

For this purpose, the publication “Evaluating the Impact of Nature-based Solutions: A Handbook for Practitioners” (European Commission, 2021a), provides a handy reference source for kick-starting the identification of suitable indicators. As well as being highly relevant for the UNP planning process, the Handbook provides a common framework of indicators and methods for assessing the performance of diverse Nature-based Solutions, however; section 4.2.9, in particular, addresses Participatory Planning and Governance topics.

Whilst this provides a useful start pointing, this represents a fairly universal list. For practicality, there is a need to further tease out a more limited number of key indicators, from the comprehensive list provided in the Handbook, which are of greatest practical value. Within the UNP+ project, researchers and city planners have therefore co-produced a shortlist of potential UNP participatory planning and governance indicators from the original NbS Handbook list.

This was firstly done using a scoring system based upon identifying overlaps between indicators, practicality of implementation, and value of the information provided for UNP outcomes. The list was subsequently checked by participating cities to explore how it met their needs and the practicalities of implementing the indicators in practice. This resulted in a shortlist of five PP&G indicators.



Which indicators can be of the highest general benefit and what do they tell us?

Table 1: A shortlist of the most applicable Participatory Planning and Governance indicators for practical implementation in UNP processes, based upon the NbS Handbook list.

Suggested Indicator – “Top 5”	Relevant NbS Indicator	Purpose of measurement
Diversity of stakeholders involved	18.12	Brings together administration, science, civil society and business to address complex urban challenges.
Community involvement in planning/co-design of NbS	18.1	Ensures that local knowledge and needs shape NbS and biodiversity measures thereby fostering acceptance and stewardship in cities with diverse populations
Involvement of under-represented groups	18.3	Addresses environmental justice by including vulnerable populations disproportionately affected by heat and lack of green space.
Transparency/ openness of participatory processes	17.1.1	Builds trust and legitimacy in decision-making, crucial in a city facing trade-offs between development and green space preservation.
Reflexivity	18.15	Allows adaptive management and learning from pilot projects, essential under financial and spatial constraints.



How do we measure the indicators through cross-cutting approaches?

Local governments developing Urban Nature Plans require practical, low-cost monitoring approaches that use existing data and do not require extensive new research. The most effective methods typically combine administrative data, digital participation analytics, short surveys, stakeholder mapping, and simple tracking frameworks. This approach keeps monitoring low-cost, repeatable, and evidence-based. Below are a number of practical methods that cities commonly use to monitor the various indicators for participatory planning and governance.

Existing Administrative Data Tracking

Use existing municipal records to track participation and governance indicators. These might include, for example: City Council meeting minutes, planning department consultation records, public hearing attendance lists or budget participatory program records: Extract data from existing meeting records, planning processes and project documentation, and Track metrics such as number of public consultations held, number of participants, representation of stakeholder groups or number of citizen proposals incorporated into plans.

Digital Participation Platform Analytics

Many cities already use online participation platforms which automatically generate usable data. The data is automatically available and can provide information on the number of users engaged, comments and proposals submitted, geographic distribution of participants, and engagement rates. Tools such as Mentimeter and Miro can also be used for obtaining feedback from specific events such as workshops. Useful outputs provided can include: the number of citizens participating in Urban Nature consultations online, the number of proposals related to green space or biodiversity, or the percentage of proposals receiving municipal responses.

Short Citizen Surveys (Pulse Surveys)

Use simple annual or biannual surveys rather than complex studies. This can be done using online tools such as SurveyMonkey, Google Forms or EUSurvey. It's important to bear in mind the sheer number of surveys being undertaken generally and the very real issue of "survey fatigue" that this creates. To reduce this problem, combine efforts with existing surveys through reuse of data or adding in some extra questions. For example, are residents aware of Urban Nature Plans ? Are there perceived opportunities to participate and satisfaction with involvement processes ?

Participatory Mapping and GIS

Residents can help identify urban nature priorities through simple mapping tools. Tools might include interactive GIS and citizen science tools which map citizen preferences



through downloadable phone apps, etc. These can plot spatial distribution of feedback and potential priority locations for nature interventions. Citizen-identified urban nature sites and community proposals can then be integrated into planning and the number and distribution of such responses can be successfully mapped.

Stakeholder Network Mapping

Track how many community groups, NGOs, and institutions are engaged. This can be done through maintaining a simple stakeholder registry. This could include details of the range of organisations consulted, the number of meetings attended, and partnerships created. Such information can help to indicate, for example, the number of active partners in Urban Nature Plan implementation or the diversity of stakeholders (NGOs, youth groups, businesses) involved.

Social Media & Communication Metrics

Cities often overlook the data they already have in communication channels. This might include data from City social media analytics and website traffic statistics. Useful data might include views of Urban Nature Plan pages, engagement rates for green infrastructure campaigns, and public comments or questions received.

Qualitative Monitoring Through Interactive Workshops

Qualitative monitoring can complement quantitative indicators with simple qualitative methods. This can include results from focus groups with community representatives, post-workshop evaluation forms, stakeholder interviews or creative outputs arising from the workshops such as visual recording, photographic impressions, story-telling or direct feedback using techniques such as collaborative ideations or brainstorming sessions. Feedback might include evidence of stakeholder input into the planning processes and evidence of perceived transparency of decision-making.



How do we make it practical?

Below is a practical indicator set that could be used in European Urban Nature Plans for monitoring participatory planning and governance. The indicators are designed to be simple, measurable, and based largely on data municipalities already collect. They align with frameworks used in EU urban sustainability initiatives such as European Commission programs (European Commission, 2021b) and the European Environment Agency (EEA, 2023) briefing on Participatory Planning and Governance.

Indicator and purpose	Potential Means of Measuring	Potential Data Sources
Community Involvement in planning/co-design of NbS <i>Monitors how many people engage in planning processes.</i>	• Number of public consultations held on urban nature initiatives per year • Total number of participants in consultation events • Number of participants using digital participation platforms • Participation rate per 1,000 residents	• Event registration lists • Online engagement platform analytics • Municipal consultation records
Involvement of under-represented groups <i>Measures whether different groups of society are involved.</i>	• Percentage of participants from underrepresented groups (youth, elderly, migrants, low-income areas) • Number of neighbourhoods represented in consultations • Number of community organisations participating • Gender balance among participants	• Voluntary demographic questions in surveys • Registration forms • Stakeholder lists
Diversity of stakeholders Measures collaboration with NGOs, community groups, and institutions.	• Number of NGOs or civil society organisations engaged in Urban Nature Plan development • Number of partnerships with schools, universities, or environmental groups • Number of co-creation workshops held with stakeholders • Number of community-led urban nature projects	• Stakeholder engagement registry • Partnership agreements • Workshop reports



Transparency/ openness of participatory processes Measures how open and accessible the planning process is.	• Publication of consultation results (Yes/No or number of reports published) • Number of Urban Nature Plan updates published annually • Website visits to urban nature planning pages • Number of information campaigns about urban nature	• Municipal website analytics • Communications department reports
Reflexive Monitoring Measures the extent to which participatory planning processes incorporate reflection, learning, and adaptive changes based on stakeholder input.	• Number of reflection or learning sessions held with stakeholders • Number of adaptations made to plans or policies based on feedback • Frequency of monitoring and evaluation cycles within participatory processes • Level of stakeholder involvement and satisfaction in evaluation activities	• Meeting minutes and reflection session reports • Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) reports • Stakeholder feedback surveys • Policy or plan revision documents



What potential barriers can be encountered?

Participatory planning and governance approaches can improve policy legitimacy, local knowledge integration, and stakeholder ownership of decisions. However, in practice, local governments and other organisations often face a number of structural and operational barriers when attempting to implement these approaches effectively.

When considering suitable indicators to use, it's also worth thinking about ongoing challenges which might be highlighted or which might reduce effectiveness of PP&G monitoring approaches. Some common barriers might include:

- The need to overcome institutional silos.
- A lack of staff skills in facilitation, communication and stakeholder engagement approaches.
- Insufficient time, funding and dedicated staff with the necessary communication skills.
- Limited understanding of the value of stakeholder input to influence decisions and translate results into tangible action.
- Unavailability of technical data in accessible or user friendly formats to enable informed participation.
- A lack of awareness of communication techniques appropriate for different audiences.

Consideration of these barriers is essential to ensure that the indicators selected for monitoring participatory governance processes are credible and effective.



References

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