

# Aligning nature-based solutions with strategic priorities: a practical guide



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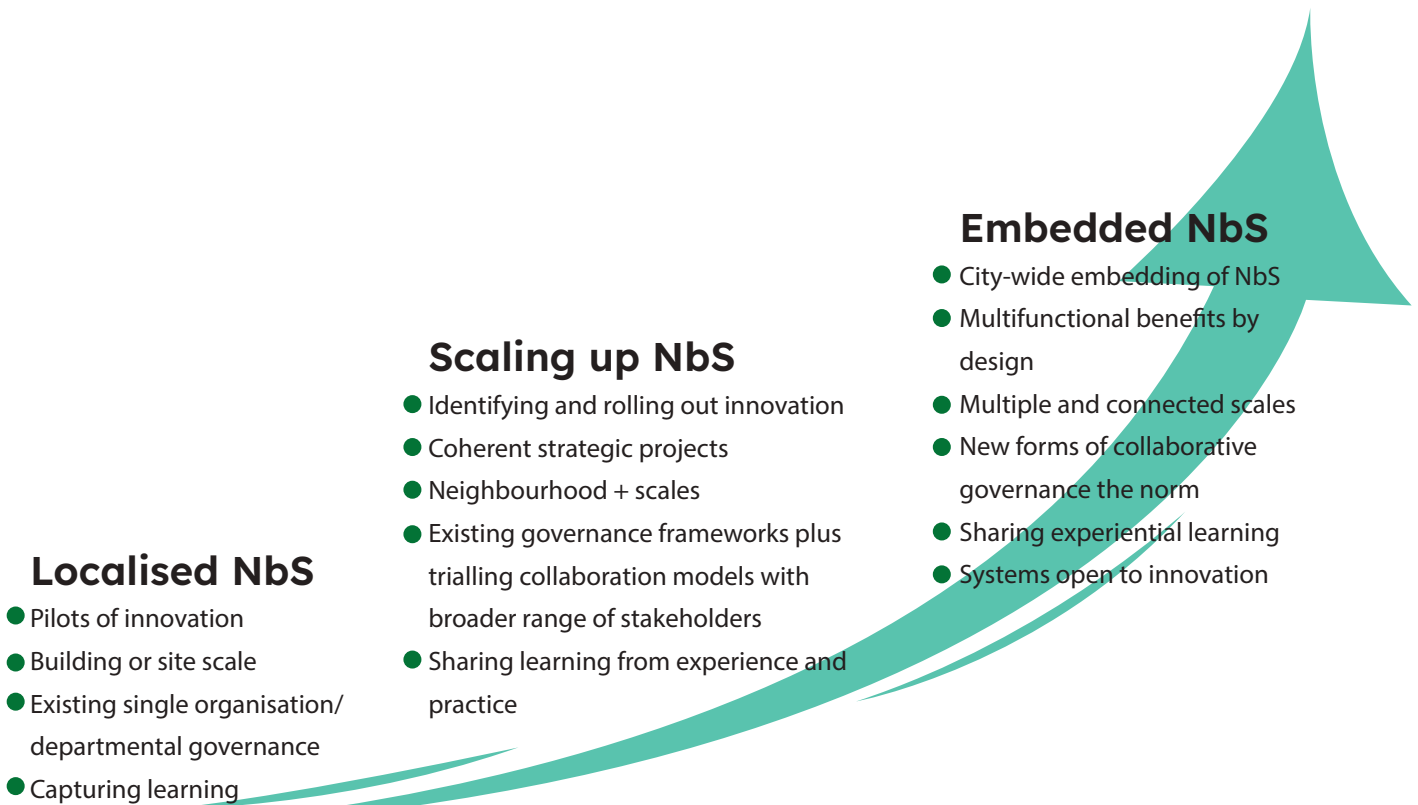
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# 1. Introduction

Urban nature-based solutions have the potential to offer cities a range of opportunities to build climate resilience, improve people's health and wellbeing, foster social cohesion, enhance biodiversity and develop nature-based enterprises that contribute positively to local economies, all while making our cities more beautiful and comfortable to live in. This requires a new way of working to embed nature-based solutions across cities.

However, we have found that a key barrier to realising the potential of nature-based solutions in cities is often silo-working. This means that a typical hierarchical structure has people working on one issue or sector without having the opportunity to work with colleagues in other departments or institutions to combine efforts and achieve more. As you can see from the diagram below, in order to embed nature-based solutions across a city, finding collaborative ways to work will become the norm. This guide aims to help you with that journey.

## The journey to embed nature-based solutions (NbS) at scale in cities



## What are nature-based solutions?

The United Nations Environment Assembly in 2022 defined nature-based solutions as ‘actions to protect, conserve, restore, sustainably use and manage natural or modified terrestrial, freshwater, coastal and marine ecosystems, which address social, economic and environmental challenges effectively and adaptively, while simultaneously providing human well-being, ecosystem services and resilience and biodiversity benefits.’ This builds on the European Commission definition, see below.

The ideal nature-based solution uses a comprehensive co-design and co-creation of ideas process, with strong innovation possibilities, leading to multiple environmental, economic and social gains. It is a big task; but this approach will ultimately change the way we make and manage our urban areas, and lead to more resilient and sustainable urban living.

## Who is this guide for?

This guide is for people working in city governments who want to develop nature-based solutions that deliver multiple benefits for their city. It has been developed from five years’ work with 10 cities across Europe, together with academic partners and enterprises who were part of the Horizon 2020-funded Connecting Nature project. For more information see this [link](#).



The European Commission defines nature-based solutions to societal change as solutions that are “inspired and supported by nature, which are cost-effective, simultaneously provide environmental, social and economic benefits and help build resilience. Such solutions bring more, and more diverse, nature and natural features and processes into cities, landscapes and seascapes, through locally adapted, resource-efficient and systemic interventions.”

## 2. Collaborating to deliver nature-based solutions

Nature-based solutions are better when people and organisations collaborate. This is because nature-based solutions are ultimately for everyone. Developing them together ensures different needs and interests are considered and that local opportunities are exploited. Collaboration also supports the long-term stewardship of a nature-based solution. For example, a local municipality may not have the resources to manage a nature-based solution in the longer term so could find a way to secure its future by involving local communities or entrepreneurs in the process from planning and delivery through to stewardship.

Therefore, when it comes to governance for nature-based solutions, we advocate a collaborative approach to governance. Collaborative governance means that the public and private sectors, formal and informal community institutions, private organisations and groups work together at various stages of the planning-delivery-stewardship process\* to achieve a common vision that could not be realised if each were working alone.

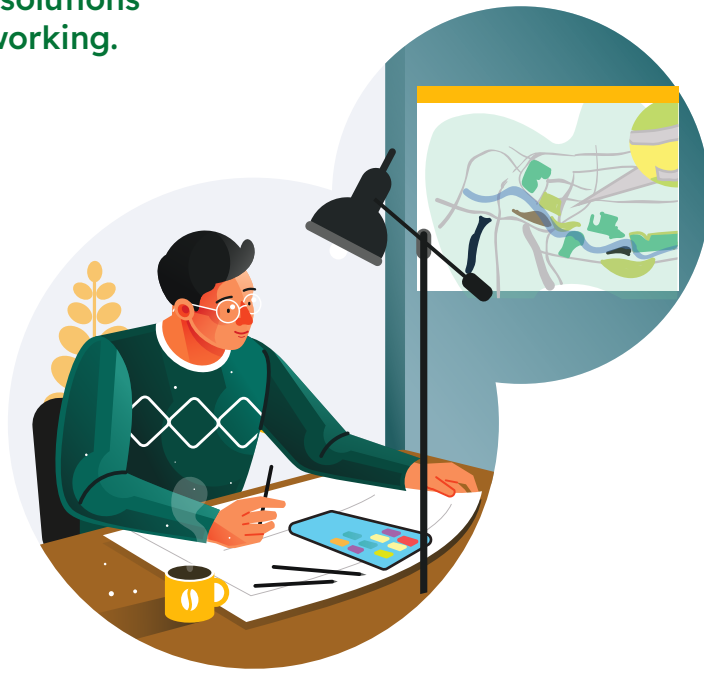
This coordination of people and organisations helps ensure that all their activities contribute to the desired benefits of nature-based solutions. However, collaborating within a city government can be challenging. All of the cities we have worked with cite silo working as one of the key barriers to delivering multi-benefit, multi-scale nature-based solutions. Based on our learning with these city partners, we have developed a few steps to help overcome silos through strategic alignment with wider goals and priorities in a city. To illustrate how a city team might do this, we have created some example worksheets for the fictional place of Anytown – it is all based on our experiences of the 10 Connecting Nature cities.



Anytown city map

\*The Connecting Nature Framework is a process tool to help cities and other organisations run through the three distinct phases of delivering a large scale nature-based solution – planning, delivery and stewardship – using seven elements including governance, with guidebooks for each element. For more information see this [link](#).

A key barrier to realising the potential of nature-based solutions identified by cities is silo working.



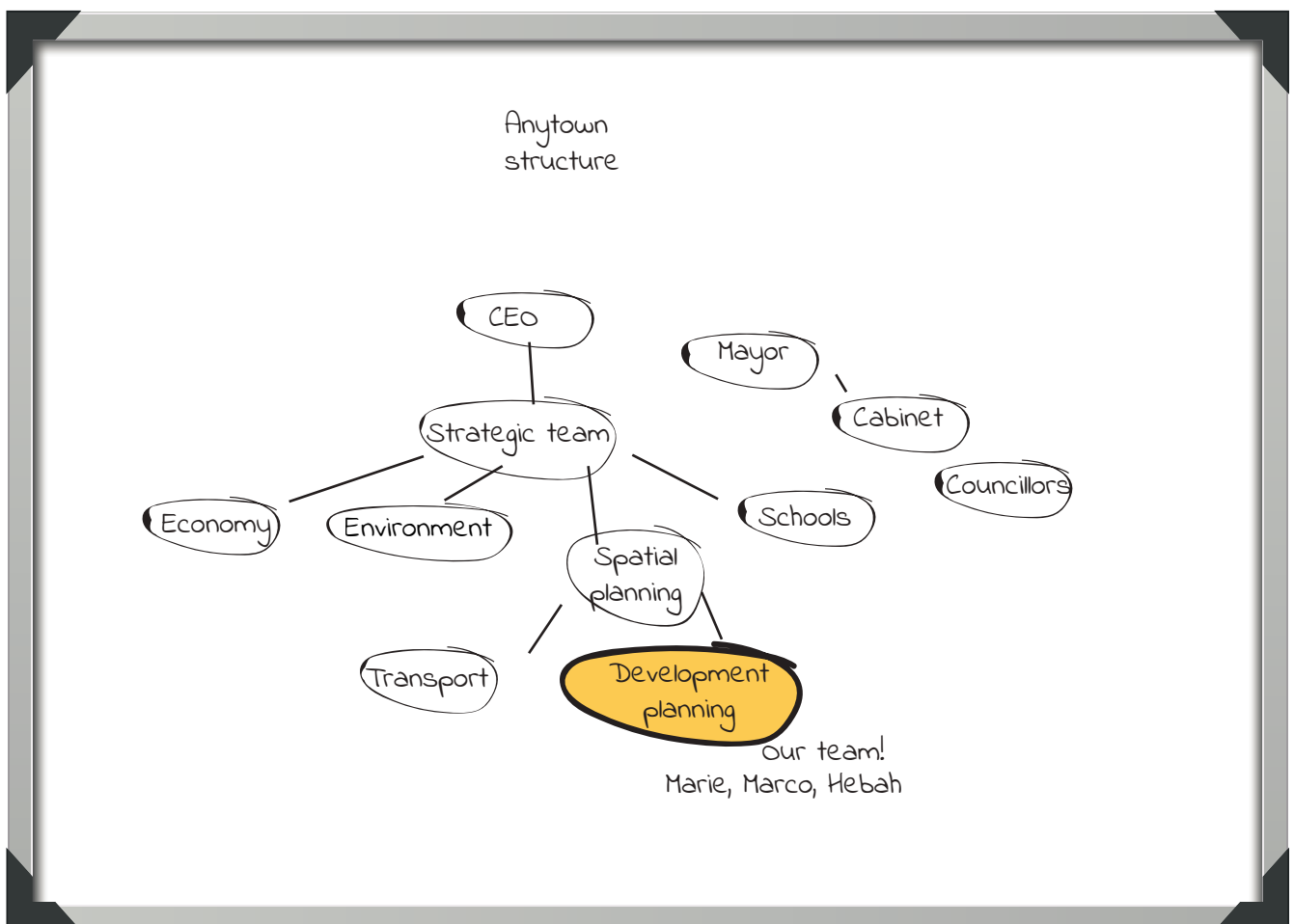
In order to embed nature-based solutions across a city, finding collaborative ways to work will become the norm.

### 3. Identifying who to work with in your city government to deliver nature-based solutions

Many cities have complex structures and lines of authority. If you are the individual or team tasked with developing a nature-based solution, identifying where you sit within this structure is the start of mapping who else needs to be involved. Then you can think about which other departments are needed for successful implementation of a large-scale nature-based solution that can deliver multiple benefits for the city. It is worth thinking about the three phases of delivery – planning, delivery and stewardship – when considering who would be the ideal partners as they could be different for each phase. Whilst we focus here on city departments, this process will also work to map the public and semi-public agencies who may be tasked to deliver a city’s policies.

#### Taking stock

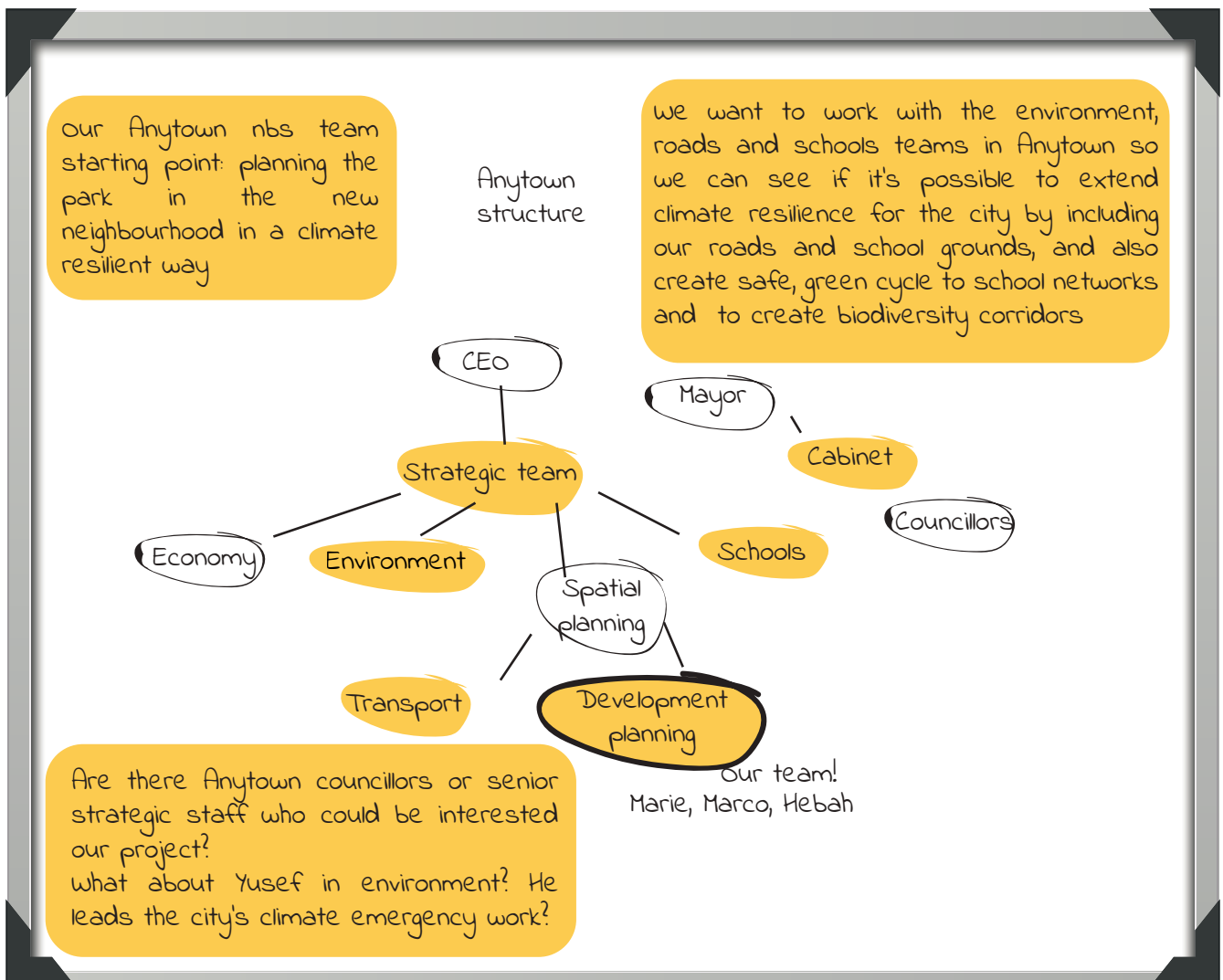
- Get or draw a diagram of the whole city government structure, departments and teams, including both executive and elected officials.
- Highlight where you sit within this structure.
- Identify who else has the direct responsibility to work with you to deliver the nature-based solution – this is your initial team.
- Reflect on this picture – and don’t be disheartened if you seem like a small part of a much larger whole. This is to be expected!





## Mapping the departments to deliver the nature-based solution

- Think about who would be good partners or allies to join a larger team to deliver the nature-based solution so it creates multiple benefits for your city.
- Look both vertically and horizontally so you consider anyone within your department or in other departments, elected representatives and high-level officers who could deliver a truly ambitious and innovative project. Dream big at this stage!
- Reflect on this picture – again, don't be disheartened if you seem like a small part of a much larger whole and these are people you have never worked with before. This is the norm across all of the cities we have worked with and yet they have all created new links and working partnerships through developing nature-based solutions in their cities, often starting a wider transformation of how the whole city works together.



## 4. Making the case for collaboration for nature-based solutions

Once you've identified who to work with, it's important to build the case for collaboration to deliver the nature-based solution. A good starting point is to identify the connections between what the nature-based solution can deliver and the relevant strategic priorities of the city, the wider area and global targets.

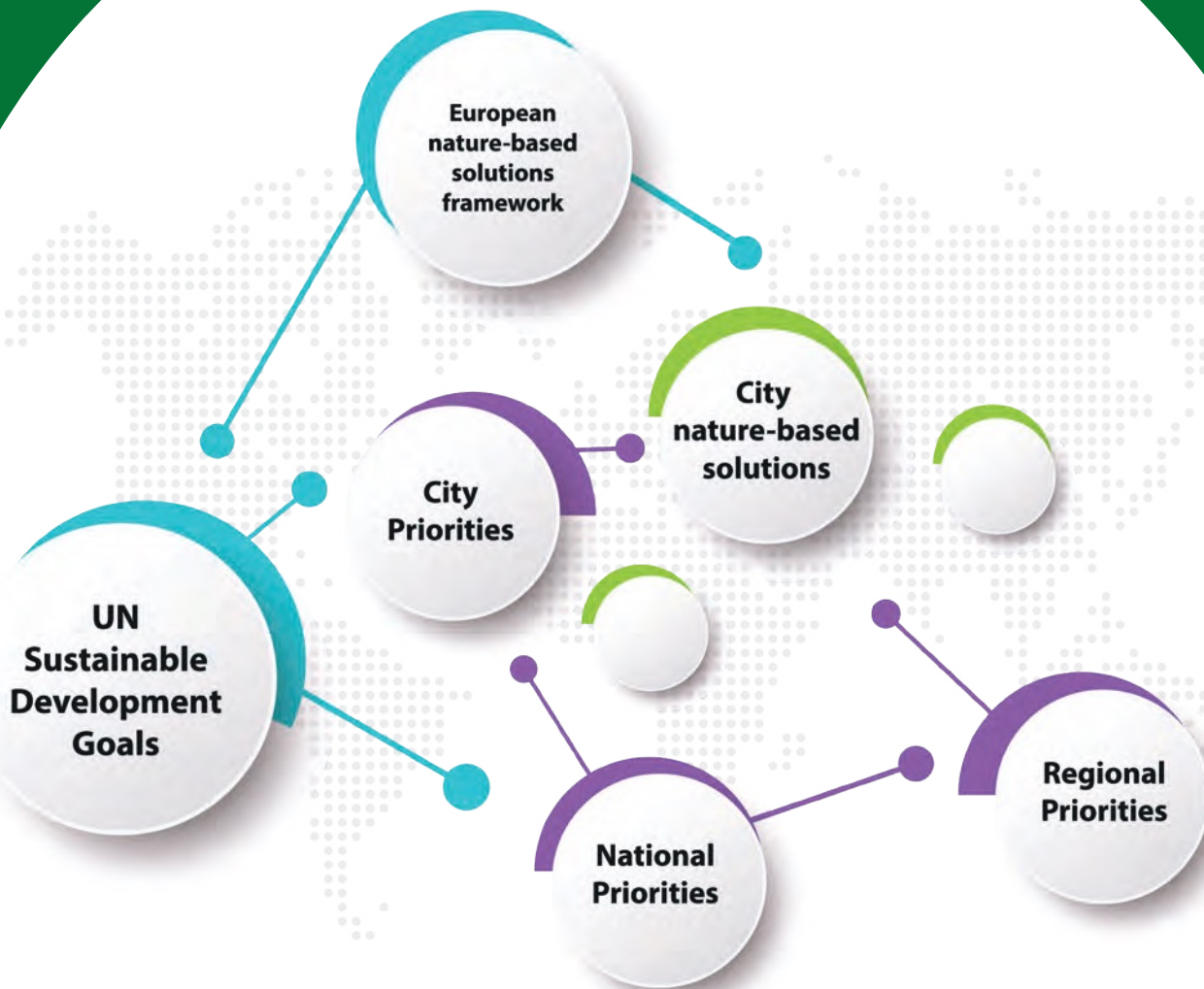
Many cities and regions adopt strategic policies to guide the work of the local government such as to deliver sustainable development, education, economic development, environmental protection and health services for local communities.

So, mapping how your proposed nature-based solution can help deliver these multiple strategic – and often legally adopted – goals can support the case for working collaboratively across departments. There are potentially economic efficiencies to be realised by this approach too. At the global level, the UN Sustainable Development Goals represent a globally agreed framework for achieving significant change by 2030.

We have developed a few guiding steps to help you make connections between your nature-based solution and city and global strategic priorities. Doing this as a team exercise with the people you want to collaborate with provides a way for you all to think together about how the nature-based solution can generate these multiple benefits. Our examples are for the fictional town of Anytown – all based on our work with the 10 Connecting Nature cities.



# Aligning nature-based solutions to strategic priorities



## 5. Step 1 - Aligning city strategic priorities with nature-based solutions

- Aligning the nature-based solution with the wider strategic goals of the city can help you identify strategic and operational ways to link up with a wider network to deliver multiple benefits.
- Identify the main strategic priorities and policies of the city. These often come with sub-sets of goals and targets. Identify which ones a nature-based solution could contribute to achieving.
- Consider any national or regional priorities that could also be relevant, such as green society and biodiversity targets, for example the European Green Deal **A European Green Deal | European Commission (europa.eu)** and the EU Biodiversity Strategy 2030 **Biodiversity strategy for 2030 (europa.eu)**.
- Next – if you have a nature-based solution project you want to implement - identify which strategic priorities this project addresses.
- If you haven't identified a specific nature-based project yet, have a look at the nature-based solution societal challenge categories identified by the EU for evaluating the impact of nature-based solutions <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2777/244577>. You can use these to see how, in principle, your city's strategic priorities link to nature-based solution themes. They will also help you identify evaluation criteria for your nature-based solution project.



Summarise your city strategic priorities and how your nature-based solution addresses them – here's a suggestion for how you could structure this, using our fictional place of Anytown.

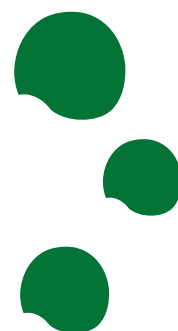
Anytown strategic priority or policy	Summarise how your nature-based solution addresses the city priority	Societal challenges that can be addressed by the nature-based solutions*
<p>Spatial plan 2020 - 25 New neighbourhood development including new public park</p>	<p>we are preparing the plan for the new park to be climate resilient - our vision is to set this as the template for all new and refurbishing of parks as well as other open spaces across the city</p>	<p>Climate resilience  Biodiversity  Greenspace management  Place regeneration</p>
<p>Schools plan 2021-2024 Refurbish school playgrounds</p>	<p>School playgrounds have climate resilience at heart of the refurbishment, and provide educational opportunities for the children as well as increased ecological functions</p>	<p>Social justice and social cohesion  Participatory planning and governance</p>
<p>Transport strategy 2020-23 Increase sustainable journeys by encouraging walking and cycling</p>	<p>work with the roads department to see if we can spread the climate resilient greening to roads and cycle paths, to also create biodiversity networks</p>	<p>Health and wellbeing  New economic opportunities and green jobs</p>
<p>Economic plan 2020 - 2027 Support creation of new local businesses in green economy</p>	<p>If we can introduce this climate resilient greening at scale then we will be creating new business opportunities to deliver and manage the new spaces</p>	<p>Improved air quality</p>

## 6. Step 2 - Embedding your project in the city's or national and regional statutory frameworks

It is worth looking at the legally binding commitments and pledges of your city, region or country to see whether your nature-based solution can help deliver that high level commitment. For example, your city may have declared a climate emergency or adopted a carbon reduction strategy. The European Union has adopted the European Climate Law to regulate for climate neutrality by 2050, with the immediate target of reducing net greenhouse gas emissions by at least 55% by 2030, compared to 1990 levels. [EUR-Lex - 32021R1119 - EN - EUR-Lex \(europa.eu\)](#) Can the nature-based solution contribute to that by housing renewable energy technologies or reducing car use?

The city could have pledged to improve citizens' health and wellbeing or sustainable transport links; which quality nature-based solutions could contribute to as part of social prescribing or improved walkability?

The city may have a climate impact assessment and be building climate adaptation plans and a nature-based solution could help with urban heat and flooding in areas most vulnerable to those threats.



City/regional/national statutory framework	How does our nature-based solution help deliver?
Anytown Spatial Plan	Delivery of new park must be climate resilient - impetus for developing approach for all open space
Regional transport strategy	Targets for increased sustainable journeys - we can create green transport networks and measure usage before and after
National climate act	Climate adaptation strategy - contributing to city's adaptation How can we contribute to net zero with our project e.g. through procurement or space for renewables?
EU Biodiversity Strategy 2030	Getting ecologist input on appropriate planting to build resilience and enhance nature



## 7. Step 3 - Aligning your nature-based solution with UN Sustainable Development Goals








Look at the links between the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals (also called the SDGs or global goals) and the city's strategic priorities and your nature-based solution project. These goals were formally adopted by the United Nations in 2015 and provide a globally accepted framework for delivering sustainable development. By linking the UN sustainable development goals to your city priorities and your nature-based solution, you are building the case for how your project is linked at local, national and global levels.

See the image below for the UN SDGs. You could print and use these symbols to match against your priorities. See how we've done this for our fictional Anytown on the next page.



The 17 GOALS | Sustainable Development ([un.org](https://un.org))



Anytown strategic priority or policy	Summarise how your nature-based solution addresses the city priority	Societal challenges that can be addressed by the nature-based solutions	UN SDGs
<p>Spatial plan 2020 - 25</p> <p>New neighbourhood development including new public park</p>	<p>we are preparing the plan for the new park to be climate resilient - our vision is to set this as the template for all new and refurbishing of parks as well as other open spaces across the city</p>	<p>Climate resilience</p> <p>Biodiversity</p> <p>Greenspace management</p> <p>Place regeneration</p>	 
<p>Schools plan 2021-2024</p> <p>Refurbish school playgrounds</p>	<p>School playgrounds have climate resilience at heart of the refurbishment, and provide educational opportunities for the children as well as increased ecological functions</p>	<p>Social justice and social cohesion</p> <p>Participatory planning and governance</p> <p>Health and wellbeing</p>	 
<p>Transport strategy 2020-23</p> <p>Increase sustainable journeys by encouraging walking and cycling</p>	<p>work with the roads department to see if we can spread the climate resilient greening to roads and cycle paths, to also create biodiversity networks</p>	<p>New economic opportunities and green jobs</p> <p>Improved air quality</p>	 
<p>Economic plan 2020 - 2027</p> <p>Support creation of new local businesses in green economy</p>	<p>If we can introduce this climate resilient greening at scale then we will be creating new business opportunities to deliver and manage the new spaces</p>		 

## 8. Case studies

The city of **A Coruña** in Spain has adopted the approach of alignment at strategic and operational levels.

The city is a pilot city for the Spanish Urban Agenda, which aligns to UN agendas such as the New Urban Agenda and UN Sustainable Development Goals. This means that at a strategic level, the city is thinking about global goals as well as local priorities.



This high-level alignment enabled a team from the city of A Coruña environment department to work at both strategic and operational levels to build collaborative alliances to deliver community urban gardens in the city. They are aligning with the city employment, education and tourism and markets departments as well as community gardening groups and NGOs.



Some of the societal challenges addressed by the urban gardens network are: strengthening social cohesion and public culture; recovering and preserving the collective memory, and the historical and ethnographic agriculture heritage; and, increasing the community's sense of belonging towards the public space. There is also a will to increase social cohesion, promoting intergenerational and intercultural relationships and helping develop the social skills of people in situations of vulnerability and social and/or labour exclusion.



In **Glasgow**, Scotland, the nature-based solution planning team mapped the connections between their nature-based solution exemplar – the Open Space Strategy – and the city’s strategic priorities. This supported their work to build the collaborations needed to deliver their nature-based solution across the city.

### City of Glasgow strategic alignments



Innovation actions in relation to governance focused on developing an interdepartmental approach for the Open Space Strategy to provide a framework for collaboration and co-financing across the city council and externally. The Open Space Strategy has contributed to the restructuring of the Sustainability and Planning departments to align them with the Development Plan group. In addition the Open Space Strategy aims to address the issues highlighted with the declaration of a Climate Emergency and Ecological Emergency by the council.

Thinking about this at the strategic level helped the team move to the operational phase in a more inclusive way, with a clear aim to increase social cohesion and participatory planning in the practical implementation of the Open Space Strategy on the ground. They introduced the practice of co-production to do this.

The Open Space Strategy co-production work included public consultation using a blend of innovative approaches for the council including online questionnaires, public exhibitions, and key questions on postcards distributed through the city's Library and Council Office network.

Secondly, co-production was focused on a nature-based solution strategic pilot project, demonstrating the rollout potential of the Open Space Strategy. This included co-production workshops as part of the development of Growchapel, the redevelopment of the Burrell Museum in Pollok Park, and the next iteration of the city's Stalled Spaces programme to include a greater focus on nature-based solutions. Co-production approaches were also used for the development of the new Food Growing Strategy.



## 9. Resources and further reading

This practical guide complements other resources produced in the Connecting Nature project **Connecting Nature The project | Connecting Nature (oppla.eu)**, in particular:

- The Governance guidebook – download the pdf here **Connecting Nature Governance Guidebook | Connecting Nature (oppla.eu) (connectingnature.eu)**
- The Co-production guidebook – download the pdf here **Connecting Nature CO-PRODUCTION GUIDEBOOK | Connecting Nature (oppla.eu)**
- The practical guide to using co-production for nature-based solutions – download the pdf here **CN-Co-production\_for\_NBS-Guidebook-MidRes.pdf (connectingnature.eu)**
- EM|Path offers a bespoke collaborative governance mentoring and support service for local governments and their partners, **www.empathway.org**; contact **hello@empathway.org**

Further reading

- Connop, S., Vandergert, P., Eisenberg, B., Collier, M. J., Nash, C., Clough, J., & Newport, D. (2016). Renaturing cities using a regionally-focused biodiversity-led multifunctional benefits approach to urban green infrastructure. *Environmental Science & Policy*, 62, 99 – 111. **<https://doi.org/10.1016/J.ENVSCI.2016.01.013>**
- Devolder, S., & Block, T. (2015). Transition thinking incorporated: towards a new discussion framework on sustainable urban projects. *Sustainability*, 7(3), 3269 – 3289. **<https://doi.org/10.3390/su7033269>**
- European Commission, Directorate-General for Research and Innovation, *Evaluating the impact of nature-based solutions : a handbook for practitioners*, Publications Office of the European Union, 2021, **<https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2777/244577>**
- **A European Green Deal | European Commission (europa.eu)**
- Frantzeskaki N, Vandergert P, Connop S, Schipper K, Zwierzchowska I, Collier M, Lodder M (2020). Examining the policy needs for implementing nature-based solutions in cities: Findings from city-wide transdisciplinary experiences in Glasgow (UK), Genk (Belgium) and Poznan (Poland). *Land Use Policy*, 96. **<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landusepol.2020.104688>**
- United Nations. *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals* **<https://sdgs.un.org/goals>**



EM|Path is a not-for-profit social enterprise that uses a range of people-centred co-production and engagement techniques to support sustainable community development and environmental protection.

We work across Europe with cities, organisations and groups to help them develop sustainable and inclusive projects, conflict resolution and team-building.

[www.empathway.org](http://www.empathway.org)





Connecting the intangible and tangible,  
towards inclusion, sustainability, and resilience.