

Falkirk Local Development Plan 3
Topic Papers April 2024

Green and Blue Infrastructure



Falkirk Council

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1. Introduction

- 1.1 This topic paper contains evidence on green and blue infrastructure in the Falkirk Council area to support the preparation of Falkirk LDP3 and in particular to provide input to the LDP3 Evidence Report. Green and blue infrastructure is defined in National Planning Framework 4 (NPF4) as features, spaces and water within the natural and built environment that provide a range of ecosystem services. Green and blue networks are connected areas of green/blue infrastructure that together form an integrated and multi-functional network. Green/blue infrastructure brings multiple benefits in terms of biodiversity, climate change mitigation and resilience, water management, landscape quality, active travel, recreation and health and wellbeing. These benefits are multiplied where connectivity is achieved through networks.
- 1.2 The scope of the paper covers the current national, regional and local policy framework. It provides an review of the current multi-functional green/blue network within the area as defined within the Falkirk Greenspace Strategy, and then considers individual elements of this in terms of biodiversity and nature networks, open space, forest and woodland, access networks, blue infrastructure, and community growing.



2. Policy Context

National

- 2.1 **National Planning Framework 4 (NPF4)** deals with green/blue infrastructure primarily under Policy 20 and states that the LDP spatial strategy should identify and protect blue and green infrastructure and networks. Other policies which deal with specific types of green/blue infrastructure include Policy 3 (Biodiversity) which makes particular reference to nature networks, Policy 4 (Natural Places), Policy 6 (Forestry, woodland and trees) and Policy 21 (Play, recreation and sport). National developments in NPF4 which are of relevance include the Central Scotland Green Network (see paragraph 2.3 below) and the Scotland-wide National Walking, Cycling and Wheeling Network. Draft Planning Guidance on Biodiversity, which is intended to support the implementation of Policy 3, was issued in November 2023.
- 2.2 The **Scottish Biodiversity Strategy** sets out a framework to halt biodiversity loss by 2030 and reverse it with large scale restoration by 2045.

Regional

- 2.3 The **Central Scotland Green Network** covers 19 local authority areas across central Scotland and seeks to transform the environment through greenspace enhancement, active travel, new woodland and forestry, improving habitats and biodiversity and promoting sustainable water management. It was launched in 2009, is overseen by the Green Action Trust, and is being delivered through multiple local projects across the area.
- 2.4 Green networks feature as a key strategic opportunity in the **Indicative Forth Valley Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS)**, which recognises the continuity of landscape and environment features, nature networks and path networks across the region. This is likely to be reflected in the formal RSS. Other relevant Forth Valley initiatives include Inner Forth Futures, a partnership which continues to deliver programmes of action to conserve and develop natural and cultural heritage assets in the Inner Forth area, and the Forth Climate Forest which aims to deliver climate change and other benefits through increasing tree cover across the region.

Local

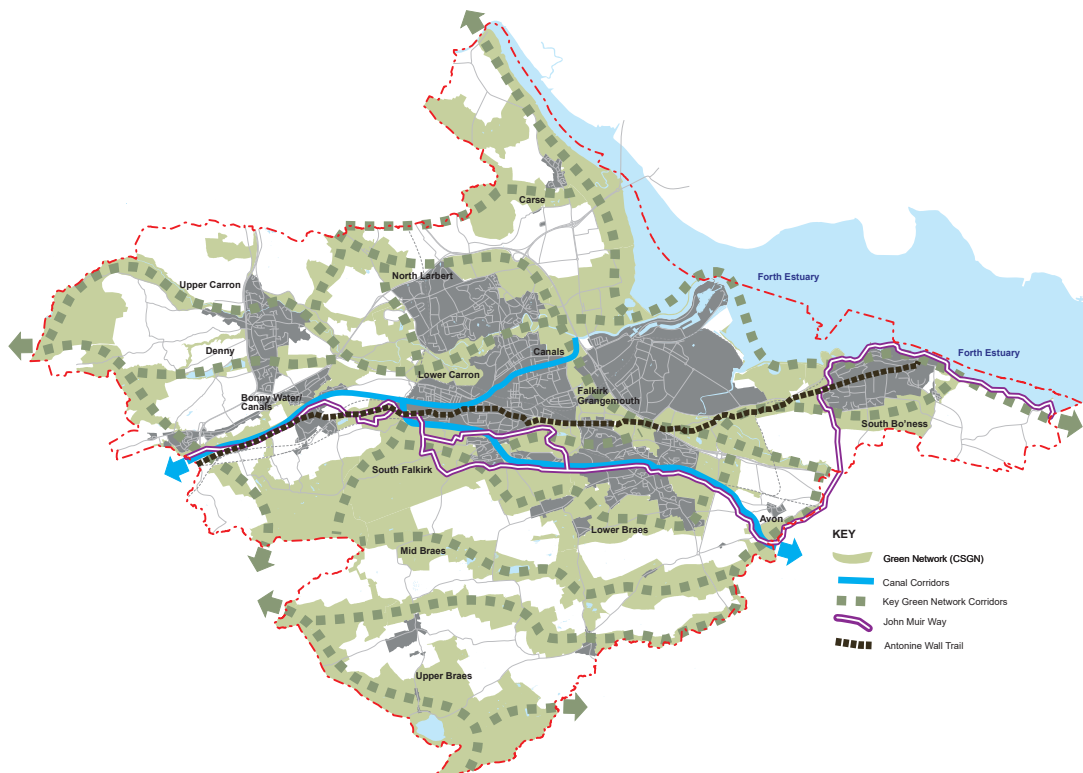
- 2.5 **Falkirk Greenspace** has provided the strategy for the development of multi-functional green networks in the Falkirk area since 1993 and is the local expression of the CSGN. The latest iteration of the strategy - **Falkirk Greenspace - A Strategy for our Green Network** - was published in 2013. Falkirk Greenspace is fully integrated into the spatial strategy of LDP2 and finds spatial expression in some 14 components of the network which link together to form a series of corridors. Further information and analysis of Falkirk Greenspace is provided in section 3.
- 2.6 **Supplementary Guidance Note 5: Green Infrastructure** provides guidance on how green infrastructure should be integrated into new development, including advice on open space, active travel, community growing, landscaping, sustainable drainage, restoring the water environment, wildlife and management and maintenance.
- 2.7 The Council's current **Open Space Strategy** was adopted in 2015. It sets out policies and quantitative, qualitative and accessibility standards for the different typologies of open space in the Council area. It also contains strategies and priority actions for each of the settlement areas.
- 2.8 The **Forestry and Woodland Strategy 2015-2055** provides a strategic and spatial framework to optimise the contribution of woodland and forestry to the people, environment and economy of the area, with an aim to support the delivery of some 850 hectares of new woodlands over the 40 year lifespan of the strategy. The Council also approved a **Forest Estate Plan** in 2019, which comprises six Urban Woodland Management Plans (UWMPs) covering sub areas of the Council area and seeks to improve and expand woodland on Council owned land. The UWMP for Falkirk North has been fully implemented alongside the first 2 phases of the Lower Braes UWMP.
- 2.9 '**Second Nature: A Biodiversity Action Plan for the Falkirk Council Area**' was adopted in 2018 and includes action plans for the following themes: estuary, farmland and grassland, heath and bog, water and wetland, woodland, urban, bean geese, connecting people and wildlife, and invasive non-native species. The area's network of local nature conservation sites (Wildlife Sites and Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation) is set out in LDP2 **Supplementary Guidance Note 8: Local Nature Conservation and Geodiversity Sites**.
- 2.10 Path networks are identified in the **Core Paths Plan 2010**. A review of the Core Paths Plan is underway, with a draft revised version issued in 2019.
- 2.11 The Council's **Community Food Growing Strategy** was adopted in 2019.

3. The Green/Blue Network - Falkirk Greenspace

Background

- 3.1 Falkirk Greenspace has provided the conceptual and policy framework for the green/blue network in the Council area for some 30 years. It was first conceived in 1993 as a means of providing a strategic focus for investment in environmental enhancement in the green belt and peri-urban areas of the district. It was progressively integrated into successive development plans, and linked into the CSGN when it was introduced in 2009. The initiative won the overall award in the Scottish Awards for Quality in Planning in 2012. A policy refresh was undertaken in 2013 to align the initiative more closely with the CSGN priorities.
- 3.2 The spatial definition of Falkirk Greenspace was primarily broad, conceptual and very much urban-focused up until 2011 when, as part of LDP1, it was mapped more rigorously through an overlay and analysis of a number of key datasets (LDP1 Technical Report 7). 14 spatial components were identified and described in terms of their character, function, priorities and future opportunities. The mapping was further enhanced by identifying the key corridors which joined up the components (see Map1 below).

Map 1 : Falkirk Greenspace Map



3.3 This mapping was carried forward into LDP2 which was adopted in 2020. As part of the preparation of LDP2, the function and priorities of the various components was reviewed against a revised set of key functions/priorities/outcomes as follows:

- **Habitat/Biodiversity** - Value for protecting and enhancing the variety of life and for connecting habitats. Protecting and enhancing the water environment;
- **Access** - An accessible green network which promotes active travel;
- **Landscape** - Protecting and enhancing the value of the landscape; planting, protecting and managing woodland; and tackling vacant and derelict land;
- **Climate Change** - Providing opportunities for: carbon sequestration; species migration; and opportunities for sustainable flood management;
- **Placemaking** - Providing opportunities for: urban recreation; spaces to grow; spaces for outdoor learning; employment and training; and a setting for businesses;
- **Serving disadvantaged communities** - Is the component in close proximity to a bottom 15% SIMD datazone.



Overview

- 3.4 In overall terms, Falkirk Greenspace is characterised by a series of corridors and wedges of greenspace providing separation and setting for the closely spaced network of towns and villages which make up the settlement pattern of the Council area. These corridors penetrate into the urban areas via fingers of open space and extend out into the rural hinterland following identifiable habitat/access corridors. The network is strongly influenced by the river and canal corridors and by topography which has tended to make links stronger in a west-east direction than north-south. There are important links into adjacent local authority areas.
- 3.5 The spatial components are described below, with brief commentary on their character/function, recent investment (since the LDP2 review in 2018), and future priorities and opportunities.



Forth Estuary

Character/Function: This is the arc of foreshore and carse land adjacent to the Forth and extending from South Alloa in the north past Grangemouth and Bo'ness to Blackness in the east. It hosts the internationally important habitats of the Firth of Forth SPA/SSSI, as well as Kinneil Forthshore LNR, and so is particularly important for nature. Access is also an important element, with the John Muir Way/NCR76 present. In landscape terms, it provides the setting to the communities of Bo'ness, Grangemouth, Airth, Dunmore, South Alloa, and Blackness. Flood risk/sea level rise make climate change an important factor.

Recent Investment: The area has been a focus for recent investment notably through the Inner Forth Landscape Initiative, the improvements to Bo'ness Foreshore through the Greenways project, the restoration of Kinneil Kerse landfill and the tidal exchange project at Skinflats.

Priorities/Opportunities: Looking forward, further habitat management opportunities exist, including potential further managed coastal realignment. The Climate Forth project offers opportunities for communities to develop climate resilience projects. The Grangemouth Flood Protection Scheme offers both significant challenges and opportunities.



Upper Carron

Character/Function: This comprises the corridor of the River Carron from Carronbridge in the west, through Denny/Dunipace, to Larbert in the east. Includes important riparian woodland including the Carron Glen SSSI, as well as grassland/heathland/bog at Denny Muir SSSI, so its biodiversity function is important. Access is also important, with good links into the riparian communities, although access along the Carron has some gaps. It is an important part of the landscape setting and place quality of Denny, Dunipace, Fankerton and Stoneywood.

Recent Investment: A number of access and amenity improvements have been implemented, most recently riparian improvements at Gala Park in Dunipace as well as significant improvement of play opportunities within the park. A fish ladder was introduced in conjunction with small scale hydro at Carrongrove.

Priorities/Opportunities: There is scope to further improve the habitat, access and placemaking function of the river corridor. There is the possibility of creating a River Carron trail. Options for upper catchment management measures could be investigated to mitigate downstream flood risk.

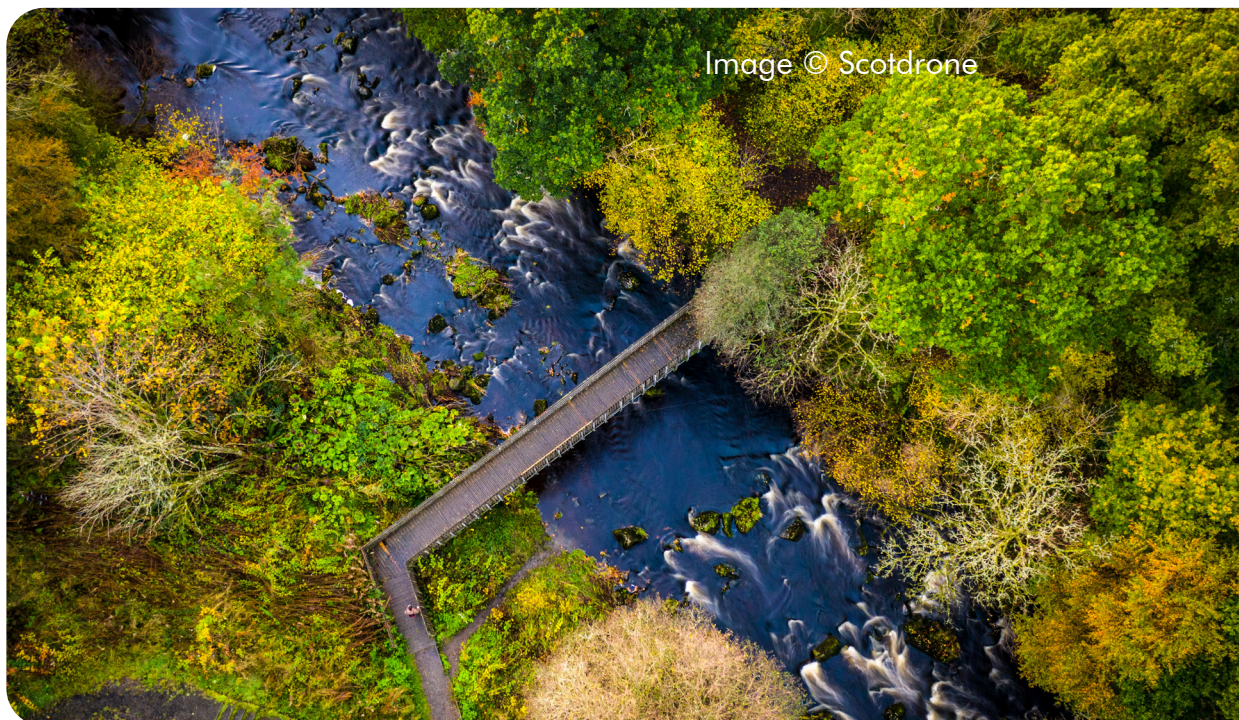


Image © Scotdrone

Lower Carron

Character/Function: This part of the river corridor runs from Larbert down to its confluence with the Forth at Grangemouth. It is more heavily urban in character, meandering through a floodplain adjacent to the communities of Larbert, Stenhousemuir, Mungall, Carron, Carronshore, Langlees and Bainsford, and linking a series of important public open spaces and associated access networks. The Carron Dams SSSI forms an outlier to the north. The corridor is important for habitat, access, recreation, and flood management, and abuts disadvantaged areas in North Falkirk.

Recent Investment: The Falkirk North Urban Woodland Management Plan has implemented management and improvement works in the riparian community woodlands at Cobblebrae and Abbotshaugh. Access improvements have also been made at Stirling Road playing fields.

Priorities/Opportunities: Further opportunities to improve the water environment and riparian open spaces giving habitat, climate change and placemaking benefits. Grangemouth Flood Protection Scheme extends into this area with the introduction of hard defences which may impact on amenity. There are active travel opportunities along the corridor including the proposed Falkirk-Denny active travel route.



Avon

Character/Function: The Avon corridor runs from its upper catchment south of Cumbernauld eastwards through the villages of Slamannan and Avonbridge then north west to the Forth at Grangemouth. Habitat function is strong with SSSIs at Avon Gorge and Carriber Glen and a series of local nature conservation sites along the corridor providing a range of habitat types. There is also important supporting habitat to the Slamannan Plateau SPA. The corridor is also important for access, hosting the River Avon Heritage Trail and running through Muiravonside Country Park which forms the important interchange with the canal corridor.

Recent Investment: Improvement of facilities at Muiravonside Country Park and Newparks Farm, including path upgrading allowing re-opening of the River Avon Heritage Trail through the park, and significant play park upgrades.

Priorities/Opportunities: Scope for further habitat and access improvements along the corridor, and further enhancement of Muiravonside through forthcoming management plan. Opportunities to improve the placemaking function of the river at Avonbridge. Potential upper catchment management measures to mitigate downstream flood risk.



Falkirk/Grangemouth Corridor

Character/Function: This comprises the arc of green belt separating Falkirk, Grangemouth and Polmont and extending from the River Carron in the north to the River Avon in the east. This contains the Helix, with the mature community woodland at Cobblebrae and Abbotshaugh, the Kelpies, the Helix Park and the Falkirk Stadium forming a high profile recreational and access hub, and Polmont Woods/Grangemouth Golf Course providing further recreational opportunities to the east. Gray Buchanan Park provides an important outlier into the Polmont urban area to the south east. The biodiversity function is important with local nature conservation sites at West Mains Pond, Carron Meander and Polmont Woods.

Recent Investment: The North Falkirk and Lower Braes Urban Woodland Management Plans have delivered improvements in the community woodlands within the area.

Priorities/Opportunities: Priorities include further access improvements and landscape enhancement to improve the visual quality of the green belt. The Helix offers further recreational opportunities in line with the recently approved management plan. Integration of the road upgrading at Westfield and the proposed development at the Falkirk Gateway offers challenges and opportunities. The Avondale waste management site at the eastern end is a detractor but offers long term restoration opportunities.



Image © Scotdrone

South Falkirk

Character/Function: This comprises the extensive area of grazing and woodland which wraps around the southern edge of Falkirk, extending from High Bonnybridge in the west to the Westquarter Burn in the east, and rising up southwards to the Slamannan Plateau. Several extensive woodlands including Callendar Wood, Roughcastle, Bantaskin and Lionthorn, provide a strong landscape backdrop to the town. Access and recreation are important functions of this area with Callendar Park, the Falkirk Wheel, and the café/activity centre at Greenrigg forming nodes within an extensive network of paths and cycle trails. Heritage interest is provided by the site of the Batte of Falkirk and the Antonine Wall. The Westquarter Burn forms an important link through to the Falkirk-Grangemouth Corridor.

Recent Investment: The regeneration of the Lionthorn policy ping area has created a large area of recreational parkland which has filled a significant gap in the network. Battle of Falkirk Trail has been established.

Priorities/Opportunities: New management plan for Callendar Park provides opportunities to further develop the recreational potential of the park. Continue to promote woodland management and planting opportunities where appropriate and explore potential for upper catchment management measures to mitigate downstream flood risk. Woodland management and expansion through implementation of the Falkirk South UWMP.



North Larbert

Character/Function: This component wraps around the west, north and east of the urban area of Larbert/Stenhousemuir/Carronshore/Carron, with corridors extending out to Torwood and Pleun Country Park, and east to Denny. The FVRH estate and its policy woodland were enhanced subsequent to the building of the hospital and provide an excellent resource for recreation, access and biodiversity to the west, and there remains good woodland around Torwood, but elsewhere the network is more poorly developed, with more limited access links and habitat value. The M9/M876 and the Bellsdyke Road present barriers to movement.

Recent Investment: Little recent investment, partly due to limited Council land ownership around the periphery of Larbert/Stenhousemuir.

Priorities/Opportunities: Priority is to develop opportunities for new woodland and paths which will improve habitat and access connectivity, offering additional recreational opportunities for the local population and improving the landscape setting of settlements. Glenbervie to Denny path remains an aspiration. There are also opportunities for path improvement around Torwood.



Canals

Character/Function: The Forth and Clyde and Union Canals provide a key active travel and habitat corridor linking many of the area's communities along a west-east spine and providing a strategic route to Glasgow and Edinburgh. The Falkirk Wheel and the Kelpies provide key hubs along the route. There are multiple adjacent local nature conservation sites and open spaces which enhance the corridor's habitat and recreational value. The canals are also vital as a placemaking asset for the towns through which they pass, play an important role in managing flood risk, and bring benefits to the disadvantaged communities at Camelon and Hallglen.

Recent Investment: Conversion/redevelopment of the Rosebank Distillery has regenerated a key canalside site, as have canalside housing developments now completed at Bankside. Various public art installations have improved place quality and identity along the Falkirk canal corridor.

Priorities/Opportunities: Priority is to continue to improve the placemaking function of the canal through environmental projects, improved access links, public art and quality development on canalside sites. Portdownie and the proposed canal centre, together with Scotland's National Art Park offer particular scope for enhancement.



South Bo'ness

Character/Function: This component encompasses the green belt wrapping around the west, south and east side of Bo'ness, providing the landscape setting for Bo'ness and the adjacent village of Muirhouses, and linking at both ends into Bo'ness Foreshore. It is anchored by the strategic park of Kinneil Estate to the west and the woodland at Carriden Estate to the east. To the south are tree belts, path networks, including a section of John Muir Way, and Bo'ness Meadow SSSI. Community woodland at Kinglass provides an important connection with the urban area.

Recent Investment: There have been improvements at Kinneil Estate, notably the restoration of the walled garden and mountain biking trails. There has been structure planting introduced as part of the Kinglass Fields housing development.

Priorities/Opportunities: An updated masterplan is to be produced for Kinneil Estate which will steer future investment. A key objective will be the delivery of new structure planting, open space and path links through significant planned new development at Bo'mains, Drum and North Bank Farms. Opportunity exists to improve path networks within Carriden Estate. The Bo'ness UWMP will deliver improvement and expansion of woodlands throughout the town.



Bonny Water

Character/Function: This area comprises the floodplain and environs of the Bonny Water from its confluence with the River Carron through Bonnybridge and south of Banknock to the Council boundary. There is moderate habitat value, with the Bonnyfield LNR and Parkfoot Moss Wildlife Sites being designated sites, and a number of other areas of woodland. There is moderate access and recreational value derived from various formal and informal paths along the corridor, and Bonnybridge golf course at the eastern end. Flood management is also a significant role of the corridor.

Recent Investment: Ongoing management of Bonnyfield LNR.

Priorities/Opportunities: Opportunities include potential catchment management schemes to reduce flood risk, expansion of Bonnyfield LNR, and placemaking opportunities in the vicinity of Bonnybridge. There are also opportunities to join up and improve the access network, not least through the proposed Falkirk to Denny/Bonnybridge active travel route.



Denny

Character/Function: This component comprises land in the vicinity of Denny, including the green belt to the south east which includes Chacefield Wood and Herbertshire, spurs northwards to Torwood and Braeswood, and westward along the Castlerankine Burn and the Little Denny and Drumbowie Reservoirs. The habitat function is strong as it links a number of locally designated sites. Access is good east of M80, but sparser in the rural area to west. The corridors contribute to the setting of the town.

Recent Investment: No significant recent projects.

Priorities/Opportunities: New planting associated with the Denny Eastern Access Road will help to integrate the new development and road corridor at Mydub. The Falkirk – Denny/Bonnybridge active travel route will consolidate strategic access to the south east of the town. There are significant woodland expansion opportunities which can be implemented alongside the Denny UWMP.



Carse

Character/Function: This area lies to the north of the Council area and includes Dunmore Moss and Wood, Letham Moss and the corridor of the Pow Burn. It is adjacent to the villages of Dunmore and Airth and connects to the River Forth. Its habitat function is strong with extensive locally designated sites. There are some core paths, including some connecting to the coast. Dunmore Park and the Pineapple is an important designed landscape, giving strong landscape and heritage interest. The Pow Burn has a significant floodplain, which merges with the flood plain of the Forth itself.

Recent Investment: No significant recent investment.

Priorities/Opportunities: Range of potential habitat improvements, including peatland and river restoration, and woodland expansion.



Upper Braes

Character/Function: This component lies on the Slamannan plateau along the south western boundary of the Council area. It includes a mosaic of raised bog/mire and grassland habitats, large areas of commercial forestry, and the Black Loch, and incorporates a high concentration of designated nature conservation sites. The recreational function is also significant with Limerigg Forest and Black Loch providing a focus for activity.

Recent Investment: Ongoing management of Limerigg Forest by Forestry and Land Scotland.

Priorities/Opportunities: Peatland restoration and management, ongoing management of Limerigg Forest, sensitive development of recreational opportunities at Black Loch, development of upper catchment management schemes to mitigate downstream flooding.



Mid Braes

Character/Function: This component runs from Standburn in the east to Jawcraig in the west, incorporating a collection of mainly peatland/wetland sites including Darnrigg Moss, Gardrum Moss and Loch Elrigg. There is a well developed access network around Standburn, but no east-west route, and the focus of this corridor is habitat rather than people focused.

Recent Investment: Peatland restoration projects delivered through the Falkirk Bog Restoration project.

Priorities/Opportunities: Further peatland restoration and management. Woodland creation where appropriate, and opportunities to connect up fragmented habitat and designated sites.



Lower Braes

Character/Function: This component takes in the urban fringe to the south and east of the Braes urban area, forming the landscape setting to Shieldhill, California, Reddingmuirhead, Wallacestone, Rumford and Maddiston. It is dissected by the corridors of the Westquarter, Polmont and Gardrum Burns, and there are important areas of woodland some of which are locally designated sites. There are important access routes linking the various villages.

Recent Investment: Phases 1 and 2 of the Lower Braes UWMP have delivered improvements and expansion of Council owned woodlands at Redding Bing, Westquarter Glen and Gray Buchanan Park.

Priorities/Opportunities: Opportunity to improve access links, and to extend, manage and link fragments of woodland. Ensure no further encroachment of development on river corridors.



4. Open Space

Open Space Strategy

- 4.1 Open space performs a wide range of functions in the Council area including recreation, play, access, health and wellbeing, placemaking, landscape, biodiversity, climate mitigation and flood management. The current Open Space Strategy was approved in 2015 and has four key themes:
- Modernising our parks and open spaces;
 - Addressing inequality and fostering community through open space investment;
 - Working and investing more efficiently; and
 - Generating money for investment in parks and open space.
- 4.2 Under the Strategy, open spaces are assigned one or more functions drawn from Planning Advice Note (PAN) 65, depending on how they are used. Spaces are also classified according to their position in the hierarchy - international/national, regional, settlement or neighbourhood.
- 4.3 The Strategy sets out a quantity standard of 5 hectares per 1000 people, a quality standard in terms of a fitness for purpose score of 3 or better in the open space audit, and accessibility standards stating that people should be no more than:
- 400m from a surveyed open space scoring 3 or more;
 - 400m from a public park, garden or amenity space of more than 2000 sq.m.;
 - 800m from an open space containing a play space;
 - 1200m from an open space containing a sports area;
 - 1200m from a natural/semi natural open space.

4.4 The Strategy contains action plans for each of the settlement areas within the Council, with a range of projects and improvements identified. This has guided a significant range of investments in parks and open spaces over the last nine years which include:

- Continuing investment in the Helix, Callendar Park, Kinneil Estate, and Muiravonside Country Park, including new or programmed masterplans/ business plans for these strategic assets;
- Regeneration of key settlement parks such as Zetland Park, Grangemouth and Gala Park, Dunipace;
- An ongoing programme of play park renewal and upgrading, latterly funded by the Play Renewal Fund; and
- Biodiversity and access improvements through new planting, woodland management, paths and the sustainable grass management scheme.



Open Space Audit 2023

- 4.5 An updated Open Space Audit was carried out in 2023 as a basis for the next review of the Open Space Strategy and to provide input to the LDP3 Evidence Report. The audited sites are located on [this map](#). Overall statistics on quantity, quality and accessibility for the different settlement areas are shown in Tables 1-3.

Table 1 : Quantity of Open Space by Settlement Area

	No of Open Spaces Surveyed	Area of Open space (ha)	Hectares of open space per 1000 population
Bo'ness	46	237.93 ha	16.6 ha
Bonnybridge and Banknock	60	148.02 ha	11.2 ha
Denny	50	156.12 ha	11.9 ha
Falkirk	120	767.08 ha	19.4 ha
Grangemouth	31	93.64 ha	5.8 ha
Larbert and Stenhousemuir	82	282.39 ha	10.7 ha
Braes Urban Area	98	327.88 ha	13.3 ha
Rural North	15	70.04 ha	23.0 ha
Rural South	51	453.53 ha	63.0 ha
Falkirk Council Area	553	2536.64 ha	15.8 ha

Source: Open Space Audit 2023

Table 2 : Quality and Accessibility of Open Space by Settlement Area

	% of open space by area with 3+ quality score	% of households within 400m of an open space scoring 3+ Area of Open space (ha)	% of households within 400m of a park or amenity open space >0.2 ha
Bo'ness	73.9 %	68.9 %	98.6 %
Bonnybridge and Banknock	54.3 %	59.6 %	95.8 %
Denny	48.4 %	75.2 %	92.3 %
Falkirk	73.4 %	75.5 %	88.1 %
Grangemouth	74.8 %	70.1 %	85.2 %
Larbert and Stenhousemuir	58.9 %	55.4 %	94.5 %
Braes Urban Area	75.4 %	81.1 %	87.9 %
Rural North	4.4 %	49.3 %	52.2 %
Rural South	85.0 %	53.4 %	88.2 %
Falkirk Council Area	69.7 %	69.3 %	90.5 %

Source: Open Space Audit 2023

Table 3 : Accessibility to Playspaces, Sports Areas and Natural Greenspace

	% of households within 800m of a play space	% of households within 1200m of a sports area	% of households within 1200m of a natural/ semi-natural space
Bo'ness	96.6 %	95.7 %	99.2 %
Bonnybridge and Banknock	96.8 %	83.4 %	99.2 %
Denny	99.6 %	98.2 %	99.2 %
Falkirk	97.1 %	95.6 %	99.1 %
Grangemouth	96.7 %	98.6 %	99.0 %
Larbert and Stenhousemuir	98.6 %	96.7 %	99.0 %
Braes Urban Area	97.2 %	92.4 %	98.2 %
Rural North	86.7 %	79.2 %	87.0 %
Rural South	96.9 %	95.1 %	88.9 %
Falkirk Council Area	97.3 %	94.8 %	98.4 %

Source: Open Space Audit 2023

- 4.6 The general conclusion that can be drawn from the audit is that there is a generous quantity of open space across the Council area, with all settlements meeting the quantitative standard. Quality is generally good for the larger national, regional or settlement level open spaces which have tended to be the focus for investment over recent years. However, quality can be a problem for more local parks and amenity spaces, many of which lack variety, facilities or any clear function, and many of which are in private ownership. Accessibility to the various types of open space, using the Council's standards, is generally good, although the figures for playspaces and sports areas do not take quality into account. Access to natural greenspace in the area is particularly good, not least because of the long-term impacts of Falkirk Greenspace.
- 4.7 The above conclusions are borne out by the results of the Place Standard survey. Access to natural space is rated highly by residents, whereas the response to play and recreation is more mixed, with the quality of the strategic parks contrasting with issues of maintenance and lack of investment in some local spaces.

Open Space and New Development

- 4.7 A key role for the planning system is to ensure that quality open space is available to new housing developments and that such developments contribute meaningfully to the open space resource in the local area. Through Supplementary Guidance Note SG05, the Council's approach is to assess the site's characteristics and facilities in the local area (through a local open space audit) and seek either on-site provision or off-site financial contributions as appropriate. This approach has been successful in supporting wider investment in open space in communities, as directed by the Open Space Strategy, as well as ensuring that large developments meet their own needs. The approach will be reviewed through LDP3.

Other Open Space Issues

- 4.8 Other issues affecting open space include:
- **Development pressure on open space.** Although very little open space has been lost through development over the last 10 years, there will be continuing pressure to repurpose open space for other potentially beneficial uses such as housing, allotments and renewable energy generation. The Open Space Strategy has set out criteria for the disposal of Council-owned open space. These are likely to be reviewed as part of the review of the Open Space Strategy;
 - **Climate change and the nature crisis.** The parks estate offers opportunities for carbon sequestration (explored through a Carbon Sequestration Scoping Study in 2021), flood management and renewable energy (explored through the Park Power project), as well as nature restoration as demonstrated by the sustainable grass management project;
 - **Resources.** The Council has been creative in securing capital funds for park enhancement over recent years but tightening capital and revenue budgets create a challenging environment in terms of meeting community aspirations for investment in their local parks;
 - **Community involvement and asset transfer.** The role of 'Friends of' groups and other community bodies is offering increasing opportunities. Demand for community asset transfer of parks is also likely to increase, although asset transfer to particular groups can raise issues of wider public access to such spaces;
 - **Private ownership of open space.** All new open space in private housing estates is now privately owned with maintenance factored. This creates issues for residents around costs/accountability, as well as questions around long term investment and sustainability of these parks and play areas. The recent Competition and Markets Authority report on the housebuilding industry has recommended that public amenities within private estates should be publicly owned and managed.

Play Sufficiency

- 4.9 The Council is required to prepare a Play Sufficiency Assessment (PSA) in conjunction with its LDP Evidence Report. The assessment has been informed by the Place Standard survey, a play-specific consultation with children, young people and parents/carers, and a play space quality assessment. The document is still in preparation but preliminary findings are set out below.
- 4.10 Table 4 indicates the general level of provision of playspaces across the Council area, and accessibility to any playspace and to a playspace of good quality. It is clear that the issue is one of quality rather than quantity, and the analysis suggests that quality improvements would be particularly beneficial in Falkirk, Larbert & Stenhousemuir, and the rural areas.

Table 4 : Playspace Provision and Accessibility

	Number of open spaces containing a playspace	Open Spaces containing a playspace per 1000 households	% households within 800m of an open space containing a play space	% households within 800m of an open space scoring 3+ for play value
Bo'ness	11	1.5	96.6 %	92.1 %
Bonnybridge and Banknock	18	3.4	96.8 %	88.1 %
Denny	17	2.6	99.6 %	98.9 %
Falkirk	33	1.7	97.1 %	86.0 %
Grangemouth	10	1.1	96.7 %	96.7 %
Larbert and Stenhousemuir	32	2.7	98.6 %	83.9 %
Braes Urban Area	34	3.2	97.2 %	97.1 %
Rural North	8	7.3	63.5 %	49.0 %
Rural South	16	5.2	84.7 %	73.2 %
Falkirk Council Area	179	2.3	95.9 %	88.7 %

Source: Open Space Audit 2023

- 4.11 There are other qualitative aspects of play provision that consultation has highlighted such as the need for a wider range of opportunities for different types of play (creative, imaginative and social, as well as physical) taking into account gender preferences, and provision for older age groups, especially teenagers.

5. Habitats and Nature Networks

- 5.1 NPF4 seeks to tackle the nature crisis as a priority, with a particular emphasis on the identification and promotion of nature networks and habitat connectivity in order to ensure resilience in the face of climate change. A Framework for Nature Networks in Scotland has been published in draft. There is a further commitment to support the '30 x30' principle whereby at least 30% of our land and sea is effectively conserved and managed for nature by the year 2030.

Habitats

- 5.2 Habitats which support biodiversity are a key element of the green infrastructure of the Falkirk Council area. Although of limited physical extent, the area supports a wide variety of habitats including 20 priority habitats which have been grouped into estuary, farmland/grassland, heath/bog, inland water/wetland and urban for the purposes of action planning in the Local Biodiversity Action Plan.

Designated Sites

- 5.3 Around 20% of the Falkirk Council area is protected through international, national or local designations. ([link to map of nature conservation designations](#)) National and international designations include Special Protection Areas (SPA) at the Firth of Forth and Slamannan Plateau; a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) at Black Loch; a Ramsar Site at the Firth of Forth; and 10 SSSIs. There are 3 Local Nature Reserves at Carron Dams, Bonnyfield and Kinneil Foreshore. The network of local designated sites includes 71 Wildlife Sites and 26 Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINCs). There are also 3 Geodiversity Sites. Wildlife Sites are designated for their local ecological importance, whilst SINC designation also takes account of community, amenity and/or educational value. LDP2 Supplementary Guidance Note SG08 on Local Nature Conservation and Geodiversity Sites contains information on each local site along with conservation and enhancement opportunities. Only a proportion of local sites are under active management and whilst they have some protection through the planning system, they are vulnerable to operations that do not need planning consent. Since 2000, two SINCs have been lost to development (Baltic Quay and Hall Wood) and one partially lost (South Polmont). The Torwood Mire Wildlife Site was partially lost to development. Locally designated sites are kept under review and new sites may be added as part of the LDP3 process.

Biodiversity Enhancement

- 5.4 The Council and other partners have been involved in a variety of programmes to enhance biodiversity over recent years, latterly assisted by funding from the Nature Restoration (Edinburgh Process) Fund. Notable amongst these are the tidal exchange project managed by RSPB at Skinflats on the Forth; the Falkirk Bog Restoration project involving peatland restoration on the Slamannan Plateau; habitat restoration at Council owned LNRs and SSSIs; the ongoing implementation of Falkirk Council's Forest Estate Plan; and the recent pilot and roll-out of the sustainable grass management project across Council parks and greenspaces.



Nature Networks

- 5.5 An exercise in mapping habitat networks in the Council area was undertaken in 2008 through the Integrated Habitat Network (IHN) Study. This involved mapping certain habitat types along with species dispersal buffers. This indicated where areas of habitat were functionally connected, forming networks of habitat which species could travel through and between. It provided a tool to identify areas for priority enhancement. The IHN work helped to inform the Falkirk Greenspace network mapping undertaken for the LDP.
- 5.6 The Inner Forth Habitat Network was a pilot mapping project undertaken by the Inner Forth Futures partnership to identify local and regional priority areas for protection, enhancement and creation of key habitat types. It aimed to promote the creation and protection of a robust habitat network across the Inner Forth area, which includes Falkirk, Clackmannanshire and parts of Stirling and Fife. Based on outputs from co-design workshops in 2019, habitat network concept maps were produced, accompanied by a user guide and action plans for the key habitat types (river and wetland, peatland and heathland, intertidal, grassland and open mosaic habitat, urban and woodland).
- 5.7 Most recently, the Council commissioned consultants to develop a Spaces for Nature Action Plan to:
- Guide nature restoration and sustainable management across Council parks and greenspaces; and
 - Develop guiding principles and mapping to inform Nature Network development across the Council area.
- 5.8 This analysis weighted and overlaid a range of ecological, landscape and social datasets to produce a heat map, indicating suitable areas for protection, creation and enhancement of habitat to help form a nature network. The heat mapping provides a further useful tool in the identification of nature networks.
- 5.9 Falkirk Council is engaging with the AECOM Nature Network mapping exercise commissioned by NatureScot and other partners. The mapping outputs from this may also assist with nature network identification, when considered in combination with other local/regional habitat network maps, datasets and priorities. The spatial definition of nature networks in LDP3 is therefore a work in progress, which may not necessarily be completed by the Evidence Report stage but will be in place for the Proposed Plan.

6. Forest and Woodland

- 6.1 Forest and woodland provides multiple benefits as green infrastructure in terms of its landscape, biodiversity, recreational, air quality, carbon sequestration and flood management roles, alongside its commercial and business development value.
- 6.2 In 2015, woodland cover accounted for around 17% of Falkirk's total land area which was just below the Scottish national average of 18%. Around a third of this is formed by the commercial softwood plantations on the Slamannan Plateau to the south of the area, with a further third being broadleaved woodland and some 7% being mixed. Urban woodland is an important contributor to the setting and amenity of the main settlements. It is estimated that the area has 303 hectares of ancient woodland, and 1137 hectares of long established woodland of plantation origins.
- 6.3 The management and expansion of woodland in the area is guided by the Falkirk Forestry and Woodland Strategy 2015-2050. The Strategy sets a target of 850ha of new woodland between 2015 and 2055 or 21.25ha per year, and maps broad areas of opportunity for new softwood forests, mixed woodland, native woodland, energy woodland and urban woodland. The Environmental Report for LDP2 reported an annual rate of woodland creation of 47.03ha between 1997 to 2008. This reflects the major emphasis on tree planting in the early years of Falkirk Greenspace, as part of the Central Scotland Forest Strategy, and supported by successive phases of WIAT (Woodland In and Around Towns) funding. The annual rate slowed to 4.64ha per year between 2009 to 2013, perhaps reflecting the reduction in opportunities for large scale planting on public land. More recently, the Council's focus has been on management and improvement of the urban woodland resource in its own ownership through its Forest Estate Plan and Urban Woodland Management Plans for different settlements.
- 6.4 Large scale woodland expansion is back on the agenda again given the policy need for carbon offsetting. The Forth Climate Forest, of which the Council is a partner, is an ambitious initiative which aims to increase woodland cover across Forth Valley by 3% by 2032, amounting to some 16.4 m new trees across 8,300 hectares.

7. Blue Infrastructure

- 7.1 Blue infrastructure comprises a range of types of water bodies across the Council area which provide a variety of benefits and services including drainage, flood management, recreation, placemaking, and biodiversity.
- 7.2 The Forth Estuary is the largest waterbody in the area into which feed the main river corridors draining the area, notably the River Carron, River Avon, Bonny Water, Pow Burn, Grange/Westquarter Burn, Polmont Burn, Gardrum Burn and Manuel Burn. The Forth and Clyde and Union Canals are iconic features within the area, providing important placemaking and heritage benefits alongside natural ecosystem services. The ecological status of these waterbodies is generally good, and their role as part of nature networks is invaluable given their linear and interconnected character and the riparian habitats that they host. The river and canal corridors are complemented by a number of open water bodies such as the Black Loch, Loch Elrigg, and the reservoirs west of Denny.
- 7.3 The drainage and flood management roles of the watercourses are considered in the Strategic Flood Risk Assessment which in turn draws on the two relevant Flood Risk Management Plans for the Forth and the Forth Estuary. The most challenging issue is flood risk in Grangemouth and the lower Carron, where the threat of coastal flooding is exacerbated by that of fluvial flooding from the Carron, Avon and Grange Burn which all meet the estuary at Grangemouth.



8. Access Networks

- 8.1 The Council area has seen major expansion of its path network over the last 30 years and the improvement and development of routes has been a significant part of Falkirk Greenspace. The network amounts to over 600 km of paths, offering sustainable active travel options for communities to access work, school, shops and services, as well as recreational opportunities to explore the countryside around the main settlements. They represent core infrastructure which enables local living and 20 minute neighbourhoods. The popularity and success of the network was demonstrated by Falkirk securing the Ramblers' Association award for Best Walking Neighbourhood in 2019. Sustrans has been a key partner and funder of much of the network expansion.
- 8.2 Key strategic upgrades to the network over the last 30 years include the development of the South Falkirk path network, developed in partnership with Callendar Estate, and offering a range of recreational walking and cycling routes; the River Avon Heritage Trail; the upgrading of canal towpaths and improved linkages into the canal from communities in association with the Millenium Link; the creation of new or improved crossings of the River Carron, facilitating north-south movement, at Denny, Larbert and Carronshore; the Helix and its associated path networks; and the John Muir Way, which passes east-west though the area from Blackness to Banknock.
- 8.3 The current Core Paths Plan, which identifies the more important routes in the area, was adopted in 2010, and safeguards some 387 km of paths ([link to core path plan routes](#)). A revised draft Core Paths Plan was published in 2019 but has not been progressed to adoption. It proposed the extension of the network to some 471 km. The criteria for a core path are:
- Is the path fit for multi-use?
 - Does it create or enhance routes, preferably loops, in and around settlements and centres of population?
 - Does the route allow people access to, and appreciation of visitor attractions, historic or natural heritage sites?
 - Does it contribute to the network of routes of varying lengths around settlements/attractions?
 - Does the path help create links between settlements, facilities (e.g. shops, banks, schools), transport links and attractions?

A core path must meet 3 or more of the above criteria. Routes meeting less than three of these criteria are part of the wider path network or fall within general access rights.

8.4 The Council's Active Travel Strategy, approved in 2023, is an important influence on future investment in the network, particularly its strategic elements and aspirations to link communities more effectively. Opportunities highlighted in LDP2 which have yet to be implemented include:

- Falkirk Town Centre - Helix;
- Falkirk - Denny/Bonnybridge;
- Glenbervie - Denny;
- River Carron Trail;
- Antonine Wall Trail.



9. Community Growing

- 9.1 Spaces for community growing are a further aspect of green infrastructure which can be an important tool for community health and well being and combating climate change. Community growing includes allotments, orchards, community gardens, community supported agriculture, workplace growing and edible landscapes.
- 9.2 Community growing is one of the themes of 'Falkirk Greenspace: A Strategy for Our Green Network', published in 2013. A Community Food Growing Strategy entitled 'Dig In' was approved in 2019 and sets out how the Council, partner organisations, business and communities can work together to support community growing across the Council area.
- 9.3 Until relatively recently, Falkirk was one of only two mainland councils in Scotland that did not have any allotment sites. However, the walled gardens at Bantaskine Estate and Callendar Park now host 36 and 8 plots respectively, both managed by the Falkirk Allotment Society, whilst there is space for 34 plots at Muiravonside Country Park. It is understood that demand exceeds supply. In addition to formal allotments, community orchards have been developed in various locations, community gardening projects have taken place in various parks and open spaces, and schools have been active in developing growing spaces within their grounds. There are also opportunities for social enterprise and business, an example of which is Sustainable Thinking Scotland's operations in Kinneil Walled Garden, Bo'ness.
- 9.4 In terms of land for future community growing, LDP2 identifies a number of potential sites under Opportunity GN24. A further, more extensive schedule of opportunities has been prepared as an action following on from the Community Growing Strategy. To date, there has been no community growing space incorporated into new housing developments, and developer contributions are not currently sought towards the creation of community growing spaces. Nonetheless, Supplementary Guidance SG05 Green Infrastructure states that access to community growing space should be explored as an integral part of the masterplanning process for new residential developments of 200 homes or more, and offers advice on options and site selection. The Council continues to work positively with community groups seeking to expand allotment provision with opportunities in Denny and Larbert under active exploration.

10. Summary

10.1 The key points are:

- Falkirk Greenspace has set the framework for the development of a multi-functional green network over the last 30 years, during which period there has been sustained delivery of green infrastructure improvement projects across the area.
- Falkirk Greenspace has been embedded in successive LDPs and currently comprises 14 spatial components each of which makes a distinctive contribution to the green network as a whole and has a range of further opportunities for improvement.
- Open space is well provided for across the Council area in terms of quantity and accessibility, although quality is variable, with a disparity between the quality of strategic parks and that of more local facilities.
- The Falkirk area contains a broad range of habitat types including estuarine, grassland/farmland, heath/bog, water/wetland and urban. Around 20% of the land area is protected by international, national or local nature conservation designations.
- Successive studies have sought to map nature networks in the area, including the Integrated Habitat Network Study, the Inner Forth Habitat Network and most recently the Places for Nature Study.
- Woodland accounts for around 17% of the land area, with an aspiration to add another 850 ha by 2055 in the Falkirk Forestry and Woodland Strategy. Substantial rates of planting were achieved in the 1990s/early 2000s through Falkirk Greenspace and the Central Scotland Forest Strategy, albeit that this has slowed given the reducing opportunities on public land.
- Important blue infrastructure elements include the Forth, the main river corridors that feed into it, the canals and several freshwater lochs and reservoirs, all of which are key elements in the green-blue network.
- The area benefits from an excellent path network, extending to over 600 km which provides a valued recreational resource as well as supporting local living and 20 minute neighbourhoods.
- Community growing activity has increased significantly over the last 15 years, with the creation of new allotments and other local initiatives.

Sources

- [National Planning Framework 4](#)
- [Falkirk Local Development Plan 2 \(LDP2\)](#)
- [Falkirk Greenspace: A Strategy for our Green Network](#)
- [SG05 Green Infrastructure and New Development](#)
- [Open Space Strategy 2015](#)
- [Second Nature - A Biodiversity Action Plan for the Falkirk Council Area](#)
- [SG08 Local Nature Conservation and Geodiversity Sites November 2020](#)
- [Dig in Community Food Growing Strategy 2019-2024](#)
- Open Space Audit 2023
- Integrated Habitat Network Study 2008
- Inner Forth Habitat Network
- Falkirk Forestry and Woodland Strategy 2015-2055