URBAN NATURE PLANS +

Short brief on governing and policy for urban nature plans

Governing and policy

*This short brief explores the role of governing and policy in shaping Urban Nature Plans – zooming in to **local contexts** and zooming out to the role of European **policies, regulations, and frameworks**.*

Key messages:

1. **Start with existing plans and strategies.** Municipalities do not need a new plan to verify they have an Urban Nature Plan (UNP) in place but do need to verify that they have the key elements of a UNP in place in existing plans and strategies and that they are continuously working on enhancing nature in their urban areas.

2. **Check the key elements of a UNP.** The key elements for a UNP include: a co-creation process in place that includes cross-departmental collaboration and meaningful engagement with residents and stakeholders; a vision and strategic objectives for urban nature;; a baseline assessment of biodiversity and green and blue infrastructures; a set of prioritized actions that are part of an action plan or an implementation programme; a plan for monitoring, evaluation, and adaptive management components; and a communication, education and awareness strategy.

3. **Recognise multi-scale governance shaping UNPs.** There are interconnected layers of policy-making and decision-making that shape UNPs – local, regional, national and the EU level. For example, UNPs are the local level way to implement the Nature Restoration Regulation for which Member States are creating National Restoration Plans.

4. **Prioritise long-term thinking and planning.** Scenario building and spatial planning can support cities in exploring future trajectories, identifying spatial priorities, and designing coherent pathways toward long-term nature goals.

5. **Engage in continuous learning.** Reflexive monitoring provides cities with a learning-oriented approach to monitoring and evaluation. It supports continuous reflection on progress, challenges, and emerging opportunities, helping teams adjust their strategies over time.

6. **Build capacity for making impact.** Capacity building equips city teams, stakeholders, and political leaders with the skills and knowledge needed to design, implement, and sustain their UNPs.

Why governing matters?

What people want from nature in urban areas goes far beyond adding "more green" – the ambition is to deliver multi-functional, multi-value outcomes that advance core policy goals, such as climate resilience, public health, social cohesion, and liveability, while benefiting biodiversity. To do so, there is a need for governing and steering towards ambitious UNPs (see Box 1).

Box 1. Government, governance and governing

Governing is the act of directing, controlling, or exerting authority over a region, organization or people. G**overnance** is the system, processes, and structures through which governing happens, often involving rules, institutions, and accountability, and can apply beyond just the state. In short, **government** is who rules (the body), **governing** is what they do (the act), and **governance** is how they do it (the system or process).

Cities do not need a prescription for *what* to do, but a way of working that fits their geographic, cultural, and political context. This starts with using a systems lens to understand existing nature and landscape assets from a spatial perspective, gaps, and vulnerabilities, and how governance structures, infrastructural assets, social perceptions, and financial arrangements enable or block change. From there, cities can identify priority areas, clarify mandates and roles, design co-creation strategies, choose simple indicator bundles for biodiversity and wellbeing, and align funding and maintenance responsibilities.

Applying a stems approach can help reveal the main barriers – namely, fragmented and siloed governance, short-term and project-based funding, densification and land scarcity, weak or inaccessible data and monitoring systems, and perception challenges such as low awareness, conflicting values, or limited inclusion of vulnerable groups. Although the origin of these barriers differs, they can turn into insurmountable barriers unless they are addressed in an integrated way.

UNPs address diverse urban challenges for cities in a holistic way by planning for blue and green infrastructure and promoting the use of nature-based solutions to enhance urban biodiversity and citizen quality of life. A UNP can bring together strategies, policies, and measures into a cohesive approach for cities and related stakeholders to enhance urban biodiversity and nature-based resilience. It includes:

- A vision and strategic objectives for urban nature;

- A co-creation strategy and methodology for the engagement of citizens and stakeholders in planning and decision making for urban nature;

- A baseline assessment of nature, green spaces, biodiversity and green and blue infrastructures;

- A set of prioritized actions (e.g., creating parks, urban forests, green corridors, networks, etc.) that are part of an action plan or an implementation programme;

- A plan for monitoring, evaluation, and adaptive management components; and

- A communication, education, and awareness strategy.

Urban Nature Plans – exploring key elements

Municipalities do not need a new plan to verify they have an urban nature plan in place but do need to verify that they have the key elements (see Table 1) in place and that they are continuously working on enhancing nature in their urban areas. Urban nature is more than just green space (see Box 2). It is a dynamic, spatially embedded system where interventions interact with institutional, social, ecological, and technological processes. Small changes in one part of the system can trigger cascading effects elsewhere, creating trade-offs or synergies across spaces, policies, and resources.

Box 2. Example from Barcelona

Barcelona is advancing its commitment to urban greenery through a range of municipal strategic instruments that converge on shared objectives related to nature and green infrastructure, including the attainment of specific targets for green surface areas. A notable strength of the approach lies in its emphasis on co-design and co-creation, engaging a diverse array of stakeholders in the planning process. The Plan Natura in Barcelona incorporates an action plan comprising 100 projects scheduled for implementation by 2030, each defined by quantitative and measurable objectives.

UNPs do not prescribe a single sequence of steps. Instead, they offer optional entry points into a shared, path-dependent but open-ended process: a city may start from data and indicators, from establishing a working structure, or from strengthening co-creation and communication, depending on where the most urgent barrier or opportunity lies. Whatever the starting point, actives can be undertaken as experiments that are part of a continuous learning/adaptive management cycle: cities test measures, monitor outcomes, reflect on who benefits, and then iteratively expand, adjust, or redirect efforts and resources (see Box 3).

Box 3. Example from Paris

Paris integrates biodiversity across multiple planning documents rather than relying on a single centralised strategy, positioning biodiversity as a key driver of urban development. Major initiatives include the revision of the Biodiversity Plan and the creation of a bioclimatic Local Urban Plan, both placing nature at the core of policy. This reflects a significant paradigm shift from a traditional "Parks and Gardens" model to an "Urban Nature Department". The city demonstrates strong co-creation practices, particularly through resident participation in greening projects and citizen consultations.

Over time, this reflexive approach allows cities to transform barriers into enabling conditions and to establish resilient, just, and multifunctional urban nature that supports current and future policy goals. Reflexive monitoring can help cities to strengthen governance, build shared understanding, and continuously learn and adapt—while making social impacts visible and adjustable over time. At the core of reflexive monitoring is a learning-oriented approach to monitoring and evaluation.

Table 1. Key Elements in a UNP

Elements	Descriptions
Co-creation	Co-creation is a process that ensures UNPs are fair, inclusive, and effective by bringing together government, communities, businesses, and experts. It needs to go beyond traditional stakeholder

	consultation by promoting true collaboration, shared design, and joint responsibility across sectors. This approach helps ensure that plans are context-sensitive and meet the needs of local people. Co-creation also supports ongoing learning and flexible strategies, making it an essential tool for creating sustainable urban nature projects.
Baseline assessment	A baseline inventory assesses the current state of nature, green spaces, and biodiversity in the city, combining environmental and social data to understand local needs and inequalities. This process helps highlight priority areas for nature-based solutions and urban regeneration while balancing development with ecosystem and community benefits. Ideally, it is done through a collaborative, co-creation approach to ensure a shared understanding among all partners.
Long-term vision, goals, and targets	A strong long-term vision, with clear goals and targets, is essential for guiding the development and implementation of a UNP. This vision should be ambitious yet tailored to local needs, placing environmental justice and equity at its core. It should look 20–30 years ahead and align with local planning tools as well as national, regional, and European strategies like the EU Biodiversity Strategy 2030. This ensures that urban nature efforts are coordinated, effective, and part of a larger, integrated framework.
Action plan	Action planning clearly outlines key priorities, actions, responsible parties, timelines, and funding needed to achieve a UNP. It connects the long-term vision to practical steps and aligns with existing plans. The action plan(s) should address local environmental and social challenges, helping to reduce inequalities. Guided by SMART goals, it should also prepare for future risks and support a fair transition toward a net-zero, nature-positive, and inclusive urban future.
Monitoring and reporting	Monitoring and reporting are key to tracking progress, evaluating success, and ensuring a UNP stays flexible and effective over time. This involves setting clear indicators, collecting data, identifying gaps, and assigning responsibilities for regular monitoring. Special attention should be given to promoting environmental justice, keeping communities engaged, and making sure urban greening does not unintentionally increase inequalities (e.g., through rising rents or uneven access). Continuous analysis, clear reporting, and knowledge sharing help cities adjust their strategies, solve problems early, and improve the impact and cost-effectiveness of their nature-based actions.
Mainstreaming nature	Mainstreaming nature requires cities to institutionalize urban greening, biodiversity, and nature-based solutions by prioritising them in decision-making and planning across multiple municipal departments and sectors. It aims to create an environment that enables urban nature to flourish for the benefit of people and the

	planet while mobilising resources and visibility through joint planning.
Communication and public awareness	Developing strategies to inform, educate, and engage the public and stakeholders about the plan and its benefits is crucial for building support and enabling collaboration, taking care to target communication and awareness campaigns towards usually less engaged groups.

Local Contexts for Urban Nature Plans

Zooming in we can see that cities, regions, and towns are facing growing pressures: climate risks, biodiversity loss, social inequalities, population change, and siloed governance. While nature alone cannot solve every challenge, integrating it into the urban environment is increasingly important for creating healthy, liveable, and resilient cities. A UNP helps bring strategies and policies together into a coherent framework, ensuring that nature supports multiple priorities rather than being addressed in a piecemeal way. In doing so, UNPs provide a solid foundation for setting long-term ambitions and translating them into coordinated action.

A core motivation for developing a UNP lies in the multiple benefits it can unlock—both through urban nature itself and through the structured planning process behind it. Justice and equity are important considerations. Without intentional planning, greening efforts can unintentionally reinforce existing inequalities by improving some neighbourhoods while leaving others behind, or by creating "green" amenities that contribute to displacement. A UNP prompts cities to examine who benefits from nature, who may be excluded, and what changes are needed to create fairer outcomes, and therefore often supports nature-based transformations that are not only greener but also more inclusive, resilient, and socially fair.

UNPs generate important governance co-benefits by helping cities align and integrate the many plans and strategies that shape urban development. Because UNPs cut across areas such as climate adaptation, biodiversity, land use, health, equity, and mobility, they provide a unifying framework that brings together existing plans and development strategies. By connecting these agendas, a UNP reduces policy fragmentation, identifies shared priorities, and clarifies where nature-based actions can simultaneously advance multiple goals. This strengthens policy coherence, reduces duplication, and enables a more coordinated use of municipal resources—ensuring that investments in urban nature amplify benefits at every opportunity (see Table 2).

Table 2. Relationships with Local Plans and Strategies

Plan / Strategy	How a UNP Supports and Connects
Urban Masterplans / Spatial Plans	• Embeds ecological networks and green-blue infrastructure into land-use planning • Ensures new development contributes to biodiversity and resilience • Supports long-term spatial coherence of nature interventions
Health and Wellbeing Strategies	• Strengthens evidence on mental/physical health benefits of nature • Identifies priority areas for underserved or vulnerable groups • Supports greener schools, hospitals, care facilities, and active mobility

Mobility and Transport Plans	• Enhances public space quality through green streets, shade, and cooling • Supports active mobility by improving comfort and safety • Integrates green corridors with cycling and walking networks
Urban Regeneration / Public Space Strategies	• Provides biodiversity criteria and NbS guidance for urban renewal • Ensures regeneration brings ecological and social co-benefits • Helps prevent green gentrification through equitable planning
Disaster Risk Reduction / Resilience Plans	• Introduces nature-based approaches to heat, flood, and stormwater risks • Strengthens multi-hazard resilience using ecological buffers • Supports integrated risk mapping and scenario planning
Social Inclusion / Equity Strategies	• Identifies areas with nature deficit and environmental injustice • Embeds justice criteria into planning, financing, and governance • Ensures greening benefits reach marginalised and underserved communities
Economic Development / Investment Plans	• Highlights cost savings and benefits of NbS • Attracts green funding and supports investment-readiness • Positions nature as a driver of urban attractiveness and innovation

European Activities for Urban Nature Plans

Zooming out, UNPs align with and enhance EU policy frameworks – namely the EU Biodiversity Strategy and the Nature Restoration Regulation. And with the growing focus on nature at the EU level, developing a UNP offers cities a clear opportunity to highlight their urban greening efforts and connect them with wider European restoration and biodiversity commitments as well as climate and sustainability ambitions, strategies and investments (see Table 3).

In fact, the EU Biodiversity Strategy calls for European towns and cities with a population of at least 20,000 to establish a UNP. This aligns with the Nature Restoration Regulation, which sets binding targets for restoring 20% of the EU degraded ecosystems by 2030 and requires Member States to develop Nature Restoration Plans. UNPs can also support the meeting of commitments laid out in Climate City Contracts and the multi-level, systemic approaches promoted through Regional Resilience Journeys.

Table 3. Connections with European Plans and Strategies

Steps / Key Elements in Urban Nature Plans	How it supports the Nature Restoration Regulation	How it supports Climate City Contracts	How it supports Regional Resilience Journeys
1. Co-creation (participation, governance, justice)	Operationalises public participation, ensuring inclusive design of restoration measures and local legitimacy for targets. Builds recognition of diverse communities and landscapes.	Embeds procedural justice and inclusion across components; shapes vision, targets, and action portfolios with citizen legitimacy; connects local priorities to EU mission governance.	Launches Phase 1 – Prepare the Ground through participatory governance; builds whole-of-government collaboration and trust; forms the social foundation for just resilience.
2. Baseline Inventory & Spatial Prioritisation Scheme	Provides spatial and ecological data to quantify restoration areas. Identifies priority zones for urban ecosystems, species, and habitats.	Delivers evidence base on heat, flood, canopy, and biodiversity gaps to inform baselines. Integrates lived experience for justice-based diagnostics.	Feeds the Data & Knowledge enabling condition with socio-ecological mapping; combines science and citizen data for systemic understanding of risks and assets.
3. Vision, Goals & Targets	Aligns 20–30 year city/regional visions with 2030–2050 trajectories. Supplies measurable nature-positive and	Positions nature and wellbeing as co-drivers of climate neutrality; links carbon, biodiversity, and equity outcomes.	Anchors Phase 2 – Build a Shared Vision with a co-produced narrative of just, nature-positive resilience. Connects

	wellbeing-linked targets.		systems thinking to local identity.
4. Action Plan / Portfolio (implementation)	Provides ready-tested local measures that feed into national restoration portfolios. Demonstrates feasibility, costs, and co-benefits.	Supplies NBS portfolios aligned with actions. Ensures distributional and spatial justice through targeting vulnerable areas.	Translates shared vision into Phase 3 – Design Pathways. Forms a bankable, adaptive portfolio integrating ecological, social, and financial levers of change.
5. Governance & Mainstreaming	Integrates restoration into municipal plans, spatial codes, and cross-sector policies. Strengthens vertical coordination for delivery.	Institutionalises cross-departmental governance and mainstreams nature across city functions (planning, housing, health, finance).	Mirrors Governance & Collaboration enabler. Sustains multi-level coordination and adaptive governance across departments and regions.
6. Financing & Investment Planning	Demonstrates scalable models for restoration finance (e.g. ecosystem-service payments, green bonds) that inform funding frameworks.	Builds pipelines for NBS and resilience investment. Embeds economic justice by ensuring accessibility and benefit-sharing.	Reinforces the Finance enabling condition. Mobilises adaptation capital and aligns finance with social equity and regional priorities.
7. Monitoring, Evaluation & Reflexive Learning	Contributes participatory and tech-enabled evaluation (citizen science, remote sensing) feeding national monitoring systems.	Provides for biodiversity, wellbeing, and equity alongside emissions. Ensures transparency and adaptive learning cycles.	Institutionalises Reflexive Monitoring and continuous learning. Measures progress on just resilience capacities (anticipate–absorb–adapt–transform).
8. Communication & Awareness	Supports awareness and mobilisation campaigns. Shares local restoration stories and indicators.	Builds public understanding and ownership of climate-neutral transitions; closes co-creation loops via transparent reporting.	Maintains momentum across phases through storytelling, feedback, and peer learning;. Reinforces collective ownership of resilience outcomes.
9. Justice Integration (Procedural, Distributional, Recognitional, Reparative)	Ensures equitable access to restored nature. Prevents exclusion or displacement during urban restoration.	Embeds justice in climate action portfolios. Fair access to benefits, inclusion in decision-making,	Operationalises Just Resilience by embedding all four justice dimensions and linking them to

		protection from green gentrification.	adaptive, reparative governance models.
10. Support Structures (Capacity, Peer Learning, Policy Tools)	Provides replicable city-level structures to upscale implementation capacity for national restoration targets.	Builds institutional competence and learning networks for delivery. Aligns with EU peer-learning requirements.	Underpins Skills & Capacity enabler. Sustains capability growth and cross-regional knowledge exchange for transformative adaptation.

Key Recommendations

UNPs are more than a sequence of planning steps. To turn strategic ambitions into lasting impacts on the ground, cities need the right enabling conditions. While the key elements and steps describe what cities must put in place to create a robust UNP, these integral activities help carry out the work of establishing and implementing a UNP in practice. They are flexible and scalable, allowing cities at different stages of maturity to use them according to their own context, capacities, and ambitions.

Reflexive Monitoring

Reflexive Monitoring provides cities with a learning-oriented approach to monitoring and evaluation. It supports continuous reflection on progress, challenges, and emerging opportunities, helping teams adjust their strategies over time. Through mixed methods, structured dialogue, and iterative assessment, reflexive monitoring transforms the UNP into a living process that strengthens accountability, adaptive governance, and long-term resilience.

Capacity Building

Capacity Building equips city teams, stakeholders, and political leaders with the skills and knowledge needed to design, implement, and sustain their UNPs. Through training, peer learning, and practical tools, it strengthens institutional ability to work with nature, manage complex processes, and engage communities effectively. Learning processes need to underpin UNPs.

Scenario Building and Spatial Planning

Scenario Building and Spatial Planning support cities in exploring future trajectories, identifying spatial priorities, and designing coherent pathways toward long-term nature goals. They help visualise trade-offs, test strategies, and align ecological ambitions with spatial realities. Grounded in co-creation and iterative design, this structure ensures that cities plan for nature in a way that is strategic, participatory, and robust under future uncertainties.

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