**Urban green space qualities reframed toward a public value management paradigm: The case of the Nordic Green Space Award**

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**Abstract**

The change toward a public value management (PVM) paradigm in the public sector has challenged urban green space managers to rethink how they define and assess their services. In the Nordic countries, the challenge has resulted in the development of the Nordic Green Space Award (NSGA), as a new shared standard. This article reviews the NGSA scheme and its development. The development of the scheme embodies a methodology for how the question of ‘what makes for a good urban green space’ collectively can be addressed within a particular regional context. The resulting scheme relies on ‘structure and general aspects’, ‘functionality and experience’, and ‘management and organisation’, as three principal themes and provides an easily manageable, unified and affordable approach to assessment of a variety of urban green spaces. Conceptually, the scheme resembles other comparable assessment schemes; however, its credibility rests on its regional grounding in the Nordic context.

**Key words:**

Innovation; Nordic countries; public parks; quality assessment.

**Introduction**

A central question in contemporary urban green space management is: *“What makes for a good urban green space?”* In the urbanization era, the qualities which defined a good park or other type of public green space have customarily been associated with provision of ample recreational opportunities and an improved (healthy) environment for urban dwellers (Conway, 1991; Sandström, 2002; Zieleniec, 2010). In addition to these ‘traditional’ qualities, contemporary green space planners and managers also need to accommodate a wider range of urban green space qualities that are valued by local communities, politicians or society more generally, e.g., those related to climate change adaptation and mitigation, promoting city attractiveness and competitiveness, or public health agendas and outdoor education (Walker, 2004; CABE Space, 2004b; Konijnendijk et al., 2013), as well as considering parks and green spaces as essential parts of larger green infrastructures (Sandström, 2002; Tzoulas et al., 2007).

Answers to the central question, thus, have changed over time regarding which qualities of urban green spaces are valued within a broader social-cultural and environmental context. Walker (2004) has framed the change as a ‘paradigmatic change’ away from a ‘traditional’ management focus on maintaining existing green and recreational infrastructure toward a ‘new public value’ (NPV) focus that includes a wider range of services and functions that urban green spaces are required – or can be required – to deliver. Most planners and managers would probably argue that they can provide green spaces of high quality and great public value given sufficient funding for investments and subsequent management. The reality and challenge for most 21st century green space managers, however, is to prioritize and ensure an effective provision of ‘good green space’ under resource constrains, weak political support and increasing demands for satisfying more or less conflicting demands from various user groups (Randrup and Persson, 2009; Dempsey et al., 2014). Moreover, what today comprises a ‘good’ urban green space is up for continued debates and relates to discussions and tensions between professionals, politicians and the public (Lindholstet al*.*, 2015b). In an applied managerial or planning perspective a central challenge is to recognise how the important and valued characteristics of urban green spaces, i.e. qualities, can be specified, assessed and then delivered on site in order to know whether green space management is on the right track (Lindholstet al., 2015a; Smith et al.*,* 2014; Greenspace Scotland, 2008).

In this paper we investigate those challenges based on a study of a collaboratively developed scheme for assessment and promotion of urban green space qualities in the Nordic countries. The scheme, the ‘Nordic Green Space Award’ (NGSA), emerged from a shared interest among key stakeholders in Sweden, Denmark and Norway in providing a practically viable solution to the managerial needs for serviceable solutions to the fundamental question: *“What makes for a good urban green space”?* The resulting methodology, developed and piloted during the period 2009-2012 and then implemented more broadly since 2013, combines both institutional and procedural aspects, such as legitimation, ownership and acceptance within the organisational field of public green space management, and operational and functional aspects, such as quality criteria, assessment, promotion, funding and administration.

The paper presents, analyses and discusses the contributions to urban green space management by the NGSA and its underlying methodology, in terms of how ‘a good urban green space’ can be specified and subsequently assessed with a viable and practically applicable methodology. In perspective, our narrative on the development of the NSGA scheme and its subsequent adoption is a case for, and a contribution to, understanding broader developments within urban green space management as well as public management more generally. We consider the NGSA experience of interest to professionals, authorities, academics and users in Nordic and other countries given the need to deal with identification, development, recognition, legitimacy, assessment and management of urban green space qualities

The materials that underpin this article were generated as part of development of the NGSA scheme in the period 2009-2012 and its subsequent implementation. Materials include project documents, trade journal articles, working papers and reviews, meeting agendas and minutes, workshop presentations, final reports, personal communications with NGSA participants and representatives of the wider Nordic green space sector, as well as personal notes and observations. These materials were used for providing narrative about the NGSA and its ability to transform the concept of quality for urban green space management in the Nordic countries within broader shifts in public policies. The section on the ‘The challenge to rethink quality’ describes the broader need for rethinking and specifying quality as a concept in urban green space management as well as articulating what are the perceived difficulties in the development of new thinking on quality in the NGSA. The section ‘Development of a new perspective on quality’ introduces the methodology used for developing the NGSA scheme. In the section on the ‘NGSA scheme’, the criteria and operation of the NGSA scheme are presented, as is a brief overview of the subsequent implementation of the scheme in the Nordic countries (in the period 2013-2014). Finally, the merits of the NGSA scheme are compared and qualified, set against the general challenge of rethinking quality in the context perspective of changes in reform orientation, other assessment schemes applied in urban green space management as well as against the scientific approaches for evaluation.

**The challenge to rethink quality in urban green space management**

*Quality in the era of New Public Management*

The development and operationalisation of the concept of ‘quality’ to support effective management practice have been a key ingredient in reforms and change of urban green space management in the Nordic countries from the late 1980s onward (Hansson and Knutsson, 1991; Lindholst, 2008; Nuppenau, 2009; Lindholst et al., 2015b). The quality concept has in particular been adopted and implemented as ‘standards’ for maintenance operations by sector professionals who were increasingly faced with challenges related to competitive tendering and contracting out, budget pressures and cost cuts, and demands for improvement of overall effectiveness. These challenges were key in generic new public management (NPM) reforms (Hood, 1991) as well as their implementation in urban green space management in the Nordic countries (Randrup and Persson, 2009). By addressing the challenges from NPM-oriented reforms, quality has become conceptualised through quantifiable technical standards rooted in a horticultural/environmental knowledge base (Lindholst et al, 2015b) – or what from a generic perspective on quality (Reeves and Bednar, 1994) can be seen as an expression of a ‘compliance-to-specification’ approach. Fig. 1 provides an example from Denmark of how this approach to operationalising quality is conceptualised for maintenance purposes.

*\*\*\* Insert Figure 1 around here (see end of document) \*\*\**

In Sweden, the first national quality standard for maintenance operations in urban green spaces was introduced in 1989 by the publication of the ‘Maintenance manual for outdoor environments’ (Persson, 1989). The standard was subsequently developed and revised in the ‘Maintenance manual 98’ (Persson, 1998). The revised standard from 1998 subsequently formed the basis for the development of maintenance standards for different types of green spaces such as those in and around cemeteries (Andersson et al., 2004) and housing areas (Persson et al., 2009). In Denmark, the first national quality standard was introduced in 1998 by the publication of the ‘Quality specification for urban green spaces’ (Juul et al., 1998).Revisions based on practical experiences has later been amended (Kjøller et al., 2015) as well as the standard has been adopted for maintenance of cemeteries (Guldager et al., 2010). Norway did not witness the same level of formalisation of quality standards; however, similar standards are used in many Norwegian municipalities (Lindholst et al., 2015c). The impact of the widespread adoption of these standards has framed the sector’s shared understanding of ‘quality’ as synonymous with a ‘compliance-to-specification’ methodology for maintenance operations, such as grass cutting or tree pruning, and ‘green’ elements, such as grass surfaces or trees (Lindholst et al, 2015b). The focus on effectiveness and cost-savings in management have furthermore resulted in a widespread ‘operational myopia to other factors’ with little emphasis on formulation and implementation of operational policies and strategies that address the wider functionality and contributions of urban green spaces (Randrup and Persson, 2009).

*Quality in the era of Public Value Management*

Throughout the 2000s, public reforms have complemented the NPM orientation with a public value management (PVM) orientation (Moore, 1995; Stoker, 2006; Alford and Hughes, 2009) – a change that is echoed within urban green space management (Walker, 2004; Wolf, 2004; Randrup and Persson, 2009; Dempsey et al., 2014). From the perspective of the PVM orientation, urban green space managers are confronted with a new set of challenges regarding provision of urban green space services. PVM requires managers to provide services, not according to pre-defined standards decided by politically elected representatives, as prescribed by traditional NPM doctrines, but through deliberative and inclusive searches for the inherent economic and societal values that can be provided for a range of more or less well-defined stakeholders. The challenge of PVM implies deliberation in vertical and horizontal networks and blurs the managerial norms and roles as they have been previously established in NPM. Instead of a ‘top-down’ orientation, managers are now called for to orientate themselves ‘outward’ and ‘upward’ in the quest for defining and providing services of public value through networked governance. According to Moore (1995) the challenge requires management to develop organisational strategies, creating policies, engage in partnerships, cross-sectoral collaborations and community involvement as well as a continuous search for alternative sources of funding. The shifts in the role of green space management include, for example, a shift from a mere provider of traditional recreational qualities in the urban setting by the upkeep of parks and green spaces to a provider of ‘new’ services related to broader, political urban policies such as programs for health, youth, education, employment or community (e.g. Walker, 2004) or a shift away from mere reliance on traditionally tax-financed budgets toward a range of alternative sources of finance (e.g. CABE space, 2006).

The overall shift in reform orientation, it is claimed, opens up for new and more inclusive approaches to urban green space management. Thus this reorientation cannot be framed exclusively by an understanding of quality which merely relies on a-conformance to-standard based operationalisation which modus operandi is rooted in horticultural knowledge and confined to maintenance requirements. While the challenges of NPM reforms have historically been met in the Nordic countries by the development and widespread adoption of conformance-to-specification quality standards, a need for new approaches has also emerged that meet the challenges of newer reform orientations related to defining and assessing the public value of urban green spaces across different stakeholders (Lindholst et al, 2015b). The quality concept taken as a generic concept is, therefore, open for alternative conceptualisations, such as emphasis on a service’s degree of ‘excellence’ in an ultimate sense of, ‘value for money’ (or ‘affordable excellence’) or satisfaction of (user) expectations (Bednar and Reeves, 1994). A critical question, that this paper addresses, is whether the NGSA has addressed the challenge of shifts in reform orientation within the context of urban green space management in the Nordic countries by providing an alternative understanding of quality which is congruent with the PVM orientation.

**The development of a new perspective on quality**

Starting from the shifting reform context, a group of key stakeholders in the Nordic countries decided to rethink how qualities of urban green spaces could be conceptualized and recognised.. For this purpose the ‘Nordic Green Space Award’ (NSGA), was established. The principal objective of the NGSA project was formulated as a mission to contribute to:

*“… a network of welcoming and popular public green spaces in the Nordic countries, by means of enhancing and benchmarking the quality of green spaces. The project hereby aims to attract new visitors (residents and tourists) and improve the use of green spaces for the benefit of the quality of life, health and environment.”* (NGSA, 2010)

The project was carried out in the period 2009-2012 in collaboration between partners in Denmark, Sweden and Norway. The appendix provides a chronological overview of key events and activities in the project. The project was formally led by the Danish Association for Park and Nature Managers and assisted by the (then) Danish sector research institution, Forest and Landscape. The initial project phases focused on formulating the project, building support, establishing a partnership and a project organisation, as well as securing funding. The final partnership behind the project consisted of 25 organisations from across Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, including sector specific research institutions, professional park and nature associations, municipal park managers and national outdoor recreation associations. In the formulation of the project there was mutual awareness and recognition of the importance of focusing on the quality of urban green space services as a core responsibility for management. However, the focus on quality should include the perspectives of a broader range of stakeholders rather than seeing quality as a question for green space professionals only.

Project organisation was formally set up according to various work packages led by a team with representatives from all three countries, as well as from practice and academia. Academics supported the project by providing research-based knowledge and guiding the knowledge creation processes as the scheme development. Practitioners supported the project by testing, reflecting and deciding upon the viability and suitability (relevance) of various options as the scheme developed. Participation from all countries in all stages was seen as a requirement for building engagement and ownership within and between each country. The work-package themes included, inter alia, the development of quality assessment criteria; judge network and training; testing and evaluation; and communication and external promotion.

In agreement with Nonaka’s (1994) principles for organising knowledge creation processes and the notion of the ‘good urban green space’ served as an overarching metaphor for guiding the development process in the project. According to Nonaka (1994) knowledge creation and innovation of new ‘products’ demands conversion and combination of tacit and explicit knowledge in deliberatively managed processes. Processes of conversion and combination, for example, require facilitation through various methods such as ‘experience sharing’ where trust can be established and tacit knowledge articulated by participants or the use of ‘metaphors’ that allows for use of imagination, intuitive learning and integration of ambiguous ideas in the creation (or ‘crystallisation’) of new concepts. The choice of a participatory innovation process as methodology rather than ‘mere’ reliance on traditional research methods was considered the most appropriate for a project which outcome should be immediately applicable and adopted within urban green space sector in the Nordic countries. Within the literature on innovation in the public sector, involvement of users and cross-sectoral and cross-organisational collaboration is assumed to increase available knowledge and resources, provide more robust outcomes as well as distributing (i.e. lowering) costs and risks inherent in innovation among several organizations (Sørensen and Torfing, 2011).

In the NGSA project, conversion and combination processes took place in the project’s various phases, from initiation and idea, operationalisation, piloting and testing to reflection and adjustments. In particular, the practitioners’ initially more tacit knowledge was sought and converted into more explicit knowledge and then combined with explicit knowledge provided by the academic partners. Tacit knowledge included, for example, managers’ initial thoughts and beliefs on important urban green space qualities as well as on how these qualities could be identified and assured. Initial thoughts and beliefs on ‘quality’ were, amongst others, in an early stage of the project provided by the participants’ presentations of various and diverse types of urban green spaces that they regarded as ‘something special’ (in a positive connotation) and subsequent discussions about which qualities characterised these spaces (NGSA, 2011). Table 1 provides an overview of the green space managers’ articulation of keywords in terms of the inherent qualities for particular urban green spaces which they defined as ‘something special’.

***\*\*\* Insert Table 1 here.*** *Managers’ articulation of key qualities for six urban green spaces (see end of document) \*\*\**

Inspection of the articulated key qualities for each of the six urban green spaces listed in Table 1 makes it clear that a generalisation of any particular list will only partly cover the qualities listed for the remaining urban green spaces. Furthermore, judging the qualities of one urban green space against the particular qualities of a very different type of green space would not necessarily be regarded as positive, as many of these qualities are context-based and rely on the value that local communities attribute to them. For example, adding ‘flower gardens’ (positive for the Byparken in Stavanger) or ‘activity place for youth’ (positive for Jomfru Ane Park, Aalborg) to Vestereng in Aarhus would probably be at odds with this space’s general qualities as an apparently ‘wild forest area’ with ‘nature experiences’. Other espoused qualities would be rather too cryptic to generalise from, for example, ‘quality and not quantity’ (Jomfru Ane Park, Aalborg) or would need further clarification, such as ‘terrain’ (Eventyrhaven, Odense). However, it comes as no surprise that greenery (including water) in various expressions is a cross-cutting defining characteristic for nearly all green spaces highlighted as ‘something special’ by their managers.

In successive workshops and project activities these matters were recorded and compiled for both the individual participant and the partnership as a whole. In this context, academics provided explicit knowledge in the process more directly through, for example, reviews and presentation of existing assessment schemes developed for urban green space management as well as research on benefits and values of urban green spaces. Review of research included work reported by Konijnendijk et al. (2013) as well as other summaries of benefits and values (CABE Space, 2004b; Bell et al., 2008)

The review of quality assessment schemes included six well-known schemes implemented in different contexts (NSGA, 2011). Table 2 provides a brief overview of the six schemes.

*\*\*\* Insert Table 2 around here (see end of document) \*\*\**

These six schemes had one important matter in common, namely that they all went beyond an approach to quality that relied merely on technical criteria. Each of the schemes was found to vary in terms of how quality was understood and defined through the structure, type and number of quality criteria, how criteria were evaluated, who carried out assessments , the proposed standard for passing / receiving a positive assessment, as well in the terms of their administration, organisation and institutional support. The LivCom Award, for example, relied on six key criteria and an evaluation based on a written report and oral presentation (LivCom, 2015) while the Green Flag Award relied on a two-step evaluation in carefully prepared parks and green spaces by a team of trained judges against 63 criteria in a desktop assessment and 27 criteria in a field visit organised under respectively 9 and 8 main themes (CABE Space, 2004a). Besides providing insight in how quality can be systematically assessed in relatively uniform approaches, the review, more importantly, also highlights that the design of these assessment schemes, including the quality criteria, to a certain extent is arbitrary – or at least could have been designed differently.

The insights from the various sources of knowledge (e.g., inspiration from other assessment schemes, research based knowledge on urban parks and green spaces as well as managers’ initial articulation of and beliefs on important qualities) were used as input to the various working groups that in turn delivered draft contributions of their particular aspects to be tested, discussed and decided upon by all participants and then subsumed into a final scheme. The participating municipalities’ home organisations were furthermore involved in the test of draft schemes in self-selected urban green spaces. Colleagues in home organisations were in this phase engaged in testing the scheme and provided feedback on its practical viability for as an assessment practice.

Through these various phases of knowledge generation, the metaphor of the ‘good urban green space’ was successively shaped into an operational scheme embraced by the partnership. The overall idea was to keep the number of criteria to a minimum, while still covering all aspects of green space quality perceived as important by the partners. Moreover, the overarching objective was to balance the number of criteria and sub-criteria. Criteria were selected based on e.g., their relevance, ease of being assessed by judges as well as their accuracy. The final set of criteria emerged after extensive testing and adaptation, as well as discussion and agreement among the NGSA partners.

**The *NGSA scheme and its operationalisation***

*A set of quality criteria*

At the operational core of the NGSA scheme lays its scorecard, consisting of a set of criteria grouped under three overall themes, namely a) Structure and general aspects; b) Functionality and experience, and c) Management and organisation.

Table 3 describes the main structure of the assessment scheme. Criteria are grouped under three themes and divided into 10 main and 41 sub-criteria. Each sub-criterion is accompanied by a brief guideline for judgment (not shown, see Table 4 for examples).

*\*\*\*\** ***Insert Table 3 here*** *(see end of document) \*\*\*\**

*Scoring and evaluation*

The assessment against each sub-criterion is evaluated with a score from 1 to 5: 1 (poor), 2 (fair), 3 (good), 4 (very good), and 5 (excellent). Scores are subsequently weighted in the overall scoring calculation against a prefixed standard. The highest theoretical overall score for a green space is 5. However, this score will in practice hardly ever be achievable for any green space, as for example requirements for management planning and documentation are high and not all green spaces emphasises the same functionality. A green space is awarded an NGSA when it reaches a certain threshold score, provided that a minimum score of 2.5 is reached for each of the three main themes. After development, deliberation and testing, in which scores where compared with participants’ overall assessment of which green spaces were seen as at the level of an NGSA distinction, the threshold score was set at 3.66. The important point is that a green space is of a ‘good enough value’ and that it is recognised for fulfilling its purpose and for its special, contextual, characteristics. A green space with high qualities regarding the function *Nature and biodiversity* will not necessarily score highly regarding *Culture and history* criteria, and vice versa. However, green spaces with more specialised functions and characters can also be awarded accreditation. When applying for the NGSA, applicants are required to prioritise in advance the weights by which certain criteria on major green space functions are calculated in their contextualised assessment – i.e. they have to specify the two most prioritised functions of the green space out of functions B1-B5 (see Table 3). The prioritisation of weightings allows for a flexible assessment of individual urban green spaces and its contribution to the local community it is nested within and without the loss of an overall generic qualitative standard. The assessment is summarised in a quantitative final score, and a qualitative evaluation, a written statement that highlights the area’s specific character, overall quality and eventual potential for further development. If an area meets the standard an award is granted for a period of three years (before possible re-evaluation) and it will be promoted as a part of the Nordic network of high-quality urban green spaces.

*Assessment procedure*

Assessment of an urban green space begins with the scorecard and is carried out in two steps. In the first step, material submitted by the application is reviewed by the leader of the judge team. In the second step, an on-site inspection is carried out by a judge team. Guidelines for assessment of each sub-criterion in the scorecard are provided in the full NGSA scheme. Table 4 provides six examples of the guidelines used for assessment of six different sub-criteria.

*\*\*\*\** ***Insert Table 4 here*** *(see end of document) \*\*\*\**

For the desk study, applicants are required to submit a set of predefined documents as well as to specify which two functions under the functionality and experience theme that they would like to see weighted above the other functions. This approach allows for the judges to be made aware of the special contextual nature of the green space thus its special purpose and characteristics.

A team of certified judges carries out the assessment. A team should ideally consist of a representative for local outdoor interests, one manager and one from academia. An experienced judge team typically takes 2-3 hours for onsite judgement and scoring. An additional half day of work is required to undertake preparations and desk study. The onsite inspection includes an interview with park managers and preferably also a meeting with key stakeholders.

Originally the objective for the development of the quality criteria was to provide an objective, easy-to-understand and assess process in order to avoid arbitrary or biased evaluations. However, the development process revealed that it is difficult (if not impossible) to make all relevant criteria both reliable and at the same time objectively meaningful in respect of the purpose of the quality scheme. Experiences from the development and test phase showed that despite eventual disagreements in the judge team – or between judging teams – about the scoring of individual criteria, generally agreement exists on the overall final evaluation of a particular green space in terms of passing or not passing the pass or failure mark.

*\*\*\* Insert Table 5 around here (see at the end of the document) \*\*\*\**

Table 5 describes the scores from five different judge teams in a pilot test of the NGSA criteria in Rörsjöparken in Malmö, Sweden. Given the need to pass a minimum score of 2.5 for each set of criteria as well as reaching a final score on 3.66 or more, none of the judge teams marked Rörsjöparken as a pass for an award. Given the perceived quality of the green space and its reputation, the disparity of the judgement of team in respect of individual criteria gave cause for concern. Therefore, further training and guidance was developed to ensure that there was a consistency of interpretation and evaluation of individual criteria.

*Judge networks*

The solution that was adopted in order to assure accuracy and consistency was a NGSA certification of judges. The judges’ certification consists of a two-day training workshop going through all aspects of the scheme and judging process, including test assessments of green spaces. Certification is a prerequisite for joining the judge network and the training should be renewed every three years. The issue of how to include users was also solved by opening the training to laypersons, so certified users could be part of the community of judges and represent this important stakeholder perspective, thereby reducing the dominance of professional expertise in the assessment. The formal responsibility for the certification is the responsibility of research institutions in the three countries.

*Early implementation 2013-2015*

In the early implementation phase in the period 2013 to 2015, the scheme became organised at both national and Nordic level through a charter signed by all national associations for municipal green space management in the Nordic Countries. In each country a national committee and secretariat was set up and a Nordic council with overall responsibility rotates among the countries every two years. Applications for assessment are processed by the national secretariats, which are also responsible for national judge networks, user representatives, interest organisations, professional, and academic involvement. Questions concerning the national operations of the scheme are dealt with at a national level; questions concerning the content of the scheme and its further development are dealt with by a Nordic council for the NGSA served by the Nordic secretariat. There is also a shared responsibility for the continuous verification and development of the scheme at the Nordic level, something which can include development and change of criteria and sub-criteria.

Concerns regarding scheme management costs, and subsequently the cost of application (which in 2014 was fixed at DKK 10,000; equivalent to approximately € 1,200) were addressed by a setup based on voluntary work and separate national network structures. Only key functions needed for ensuring consistency across each country were centralised at the more costly Nordic level. Concerns regarding the level of centralisation were also reflected in the organisational setup where the basic principle was that all questions regarding criteria and judging procedures are a common Nordic responsibility, whereas the operations of assessment and awarding are a national responsibility within a simple organisational structure. The network and its institutionalisation through a new administrative structure and a charter are now seen as a new platform for professional development and initiation of new projects across sectors in the Nordic countries (Andersenet al., 2013).

In the early implementation phase altogether 16 urban green spaces across major cities in all Nordic countries received an award (NSGA, 2015). Six urban green spaces have been awarded in Denmark (in the cities of Aalborg, Esbjerg, Aarhus, Randers and finally Odense with two awarded urban green spaces), as well as seven urban green spaces in Norway (in the cities of Oslo, Bergen, Bærum, Kristiansand, Søgne) and three urban green spaces in Sweden (in the cities of Malmö, Gothenburg, Stockholm). The awarded urban green spaces encompass spaces with strong ‘nature’ features, classical ‘park’ features, as well as spaces with a ‘modern’ character. The diversity of the awarded urban green spaces reflects the flexibility in the underlying quality criteria and assessment procedure toward urban green spaces of differing characteristics. All green spaces assessed in the early implementation phase passed the threshold, although several other areas did not score high enough for an award during the development phase (e.g. Rörsjöparken as discussed earlier in this article). One possible reason for the high success rate is that cities started by submitting their best parks for evaluation, something which seems to be confirmed by the high average scores of the evaluations to date.

**Discussion**

*NGSA and the shift in reform orientation*

The premise and overall context for the development of the NGSA scheme was the shift in reform orientation from NPM toward PVM. A key question is whether NGSA is addressing the challenge of PVM. The NGSA scheme has sought to include a broader PVM perspective in its conceptualisation of important qualities as well as a reposition of the relevance of the quality concept from an operational approach to a more strategically orientated approach. In particular, the scheme provides an alternative (concept) for thinking and working with the qualities of urban green spaces within the Nordic countries that modernises the approach to quality that was based solely on a conformance-to-specification definition as introduced by NPM reforms. Instead, the focus includes functionality, service and governance. This departure is most easily demonstrated by comparison of the quality criteria defined in the example in Fig. 1 with the quality criteria in Table 3.

*Compliance with research based standards?*

The range of criteria captures, at least on the general level, the varying public benefits and values provided by urban green spaces (Konijnendijk et al., 2013). However, the scheme does not seek to quantify or measure these benefits in a more comprehensive and scientific way, e.g. by methods of economic valuation or evaluation of the sustainability of the species composition of tree stands. The involved methodological rigour (and relatively higher cost) involved in scientific assessments would render the scheme practically infeasible for implementation. The ‘loss’ in rigour ‘pays’ for both an increase in relevance (for practical use in urban green spaces management) as well as the possibility to evaluate a green spaces in a holistic, contextual, and cost effective approach.

*International comparisons*

This NGSA scheme provides a new concept for thinking and working with urban green space quality in the Nordic countries. It resembles, to a certain degree, developments in other national policy contexts, while also being congruent with other related assessment schemes used within urban green space management.

The NGSA has parity with most of the schemes it was compared with (see Table 2) – while these schemes also had similarities within and between themselves. In particular, all schemes are holistic in their approach to assessment by including both managerial aspects as well as a wider range of values and benefits thereby transforming the sterile understanding of ‘quality’ as a matter of the degree of conformance-to-specification. The schemes do however differ greatly in the complexity of the system and the applied criteria. LivCom is the ‘simplest’ system with its 6 criteria and open-ended guidelines for their assessment. The most complex system is that of FSC which relies on 10 ‘principles’, 52 main criteria and 171 sub-criteria of which many are objective in the sense they seek to minimise the scope for subjective interpretation. Regarding complexity, the NGSA sits in between the two extremes with its 3 themes, 10 main criteria and 41 sub-criteria. The differences could be explained by the different contextual aims for the schemes, and their implementation combined with the availability of the resources available for operation of the scheme.

NGSA resembles in particular, the slightly more complex and elaborated UK-based GFA scheme. The two schemes share the principle that all green spaces can be given the awarded when meeting a certain standard. In the UK, the GFA has since 1997 been implemented and institutionally supported in varying degrees to promote excellence within urban green space management by a quality assessment scheme that sets a high, diverse and comprehensive standard for what planning and management as well as urban green spaces should live up to. By 2015, green space management in Europe has also witnessed an internationalisation of the GFA by assessment of green spaces in countries such as Germany, the Netherlands, Australia and New Zealand. The GFA and the NGSA represent similar changes in conceptual outlook, but are adapted within different national and cultural contexts, each with their own requirements and characteristics, in the overall approach to thinking and working with quality.

*International development*

The emergence of fairly similar conceptual approaches to management of urban green spaces supports a hypothesis that different approaches concerning quality in response to the PVM shift can result in a 'standard' that is similar across various quality schemes. It could be posited that the shift in reform orientation from NPM toward PVM has required urban green space managers to change how they think and work with the qualities of urban green spaces. They have had to revisit the question: *“what makes for a good urban green space?*” from an operational approach where overall functionality was given by tradition to a strategic approach where functionality needed to be assessed in relation to a wider range of services of publicly espoused value.

Nordic countries may be perceived as ‘late-adopters’ compared to the early innovators that has been witnessed in the UK. Ideas and practices regarding assessment of quality from a holistic approach has been transferred from previous schemes by Nordic stakeholders when confronted with the challenges in the shift from NPM to PVM adapting especially the approach of the GFA to the specific Nordic context, parallel with but also distinct from the more direct transfer of the GFA to e.g. The Netherlands or Germany in the same period.

From a general perspective the NGSA could be criticised for being loosely founded in comprehensive and scientific methods and it could be posited that adoption of the resembling, but more elaborate, GFA scheme would be more feasible. An adaptation of the generic concept in a participatory innovation process was, however, chosen in the development of the NGSA scheme, indicating that in the Nordic context, the credibility of the scheme is gained by grounding in a regional approach to defining and assessing green space qualities and the scheme’s overall viability is gained through a low-cost and multi-lateral administrative, culturally sensitive, structure.

**Conclusions and perspectives**

The ambition of the NGSA project was to find a viable and practically applicable approach within the Nordic countries to address the critical question: “*what makes for a good green space?”* So what then *is* a good green space in terms of this scheme? The scheme’s basic structure addresses this question via three main themes: A) ‘structure and general aspects’, B) ‘functionality and experience’, and C) ‘management and organisation’, that predicate the premise that a good green space is well-placed and connected within a city’s overall green structure, and expresses the will of its stakeholders. The green space is a welcoming place which provides the benefits and experiences that are demanded by the local community, while management and maintenance are well-structured, effective and efficient in long as well as short terms. Moreover, the green space and its respective contribution to the city’s overall green infrastructure are recognised, and incorporated into, policy and planning.

The NGSA criteria allow for different types and sizes of green spaces to be judged on their own merits – for example on the base of their respective functionality (e.g. nature area, recreational woodland, cultural-historical park). The scheme does however leave the more substantive question open of what characteristics and physical features a good green space should contain. NGSA contains minor, but explicit, preferences for some features such as the presence of ‘old and conservation-worthy trees’, but green spaces that do not possess such features are still able to meet the requirements for being awarded, based on local contextually relevant criteria – that can be objectively shown to be within the overall marking criteria. In this respect, NGSA stands out as a scheme with both complementary and alternative uses within the range of schemes employed within urban green space management that rely on quality as a core concept.

Although its implementation has been limited to a small number of Nordic cities and green spaces, the NGSA project has contributed to changing the conceptualisation of quality that defined the initiation of the project. The integration of strategy, development, user involvement, maintenance, recreational and ecological functions, as well as the mix of practical and academic knowledge in the development of the NSGA scheme has resulted in an easily manageable and affordable accreditation scheme. It still remains to be seen, however, whether NGSA will lead to a greater consensus in the use of quality concepts and whether the data it amasses will be effectively deployed to successfully continue to derive good quality out of a limited budget or what can be termed ‘affordable excellence’ in a quality perspective. After two years of implementation, it is too early to say whether NGSA will achieve its initial objective or what the wider impact on the sector in the Nordic countries will be. This obviously requires a longer timeframe in order to evaluate in a realistic way.

While the project has delivered the innovation of a new quality scheme at the conceptual level, whether reframing quality from needs in NPM to needs in PVM will transform the general perception of what constitutes a 'good quality green space or park' is still at the data collection and analysis stage. Furthermore, how this scheme will contribute to the “development, recognition and promotion of urban green spaces of high experience and recreational quality” – spaces that politicians will support and citizens are willing to invest their taxes in within the Nordic countries - can only be fully assessed once adequate data is both available and has been rigorously interrogated.

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**Fig. 1.** Operationalization of quality for urban green space maintenance. Source: Adapted from Kjøller et al., 2015

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| **Element group (Grass)** |  | |
| **Element name (utility lawn)**  Purpose and function (for landscape and use). *E.g., utility lawns are found in gardens, parks and residential areas and can be used for stay, play and ball games. Utility lawns typically have high durability and use.* | | |
| **Description (horticultural definition of element)**  *E.g., utility lawns are uniform in their expression and are clearly delineated for other park elements. There are only little and dispersed weeds. The grass forms a continuous surface which is predominantly green. The lawn appears fairly even.* | | |
| **WORK STANDARD**  Criteria that the element/work must comply with. | | |
| **Global** | | **Local** |
| **Performance**  *E.g., grass height is from 4 cm to max 8-12 cm.*  *Around furniture and solid elements grass height is max.15 cm.*  *Grass clippings shall nowhere appear more than a clump of 10 x10 cm per m2.* | | *E.g., grass height: 8–10 cm.* |
| **Instruction**  *E.g., collection of leafs, branches and the like are removed before mowing and one time after leaf fall in November/December and one time in March/April.*  *Spring preparation before starting mowing with removal of fallen branches, molehills and other.* | | *E.g., yearly: even application of 100 kg NPK per 10,000 m2.* |
| **Additional (by request only)**  *E.g., fertilization (0-3) time (s) referred to manure plan*  *Vertical cutting annually with collection* | | *E.g., topdressing of 10,000 m2 grass surface.* |
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**Table 1.** Nordic green space managers’ articulation of key qualities for six urban green spaces (source; adapted from NGSA, 2011).

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| **Jomfru Ane Park (Aalborg, Denmark)** | **Fladbro Skov (Randers, Denmark)** | **Byparken (Stavanger, Norway)** | **Eventyrhaven (Odense, Denmark)** | **Vestereng**  **(Aarhus, Denmark)** | **Havneparken Copenhagen, Denmark)** |
| * Accessibility * Cleaning and safety * Lushness and flowers * Nearby restaurants and cafés * Harbor bath * Proximity to water * Light in night time * Connecting the city center * Activity place for youth * Visitor monitoring * ’Quality’ and not ’quantity’ | * Unique cultural environment * Node for large public arrangements * Many nature types * Many facilities for outdoor activities * Good information * Synergies in the area * Robust inventory * Spacious * Health | * High and expensive standard * Identity * Tourism * Proximity to water * Central place in the city * True to the spirit of the place * Green lung * Lighting * Ice rink * Beautiful | * Proximity to water * Terrain * All season * Nature experiences * Landscape * Flower gardens * Grass cover, trees and paths * Design of inventory * All day / night use * Respect for the original / antecedents | * Proximity to water * Accessibility * Many activities * Nature experiences * Close to city center * Wild forest expression * Thicket * Old able species * User involvement * Co-finance from neighbors | * Open park * Interpret earlier use of the area * Spacious * Intensive use * Many user groups * Social space * All day / night use * Harbor bath |
| *Note: The articulation of key quality criteria for particular urban green spaces was presented by municipal urban green spaces managers as part of a partner workshop in the early phase of the development process leading to the NGSA scheme.* | | | | | |

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| **Table 2.** Overview of various ‘green’ assessment schemes. | | | | | |
| **Scheme** | **Country (year)** | **Purpose** | **Framework for assessment (criteria)** | | **Assessment details** |
| Green Flag Award (GFA) | England (1996) / internationally oriented (currently) | Recognise and reward the best green spaces | Assessment uses a complex scoring system against 63 sub-criteria (thematised in 9 key criteria) for a desktop study and 27 sub-criteria (thematised in 8 key criteria) for a site visit. | Expert assessment (objective and subjective) against a standard (a minimum score) of green spaces based on a desktop study and site visit. | |
| *Key criteria examples:* | *Eight key criteria (site visit), including: 1) A welcoming place, 2) Healthy, safe and secure, 3) Clean and well maintained, 4) Sustainability, 5) Conservation and heritage, 6) Community involvement, 7) Marketing, and 8) Management.* | | | | |
| The Tree City growth award | USA (1976) | Promote innovative programs and ideas in tree management | Assessment uses a scoring system against 48 sub-criteria thematised in four key criteria | Expert assessment (objective and subjective) against a standard (a minimum score) of tree management programs based on a desktop study | |
| *Key criteria examples:* | *1) Education and public relations, 2) Partnerships, 3) Planning and management and 4) Tree planting and maintenance.* | | | | |
| Entente Florale | England and France (1975) / Europe (currently) | Promote a greener and more pleasant environment | Assessment uses a scoring system against 48 sub-criteria thematised in ten key criteria. | Expert assessment (subjective interpretation) against a standard (three levels of scores) in competition between selected cities in different countries. Assessment based on a desktop study and field visit. | |
| *Key criteria examples:* | *1) Planned / development approach, 2) Environment, 3) Landscape, 4) Open green spaces, 5) permanent planting, 6) Seasonal planting, 7) Environmental education, 8) Effort and staff, 9) Tourism and leisure, and 10) Presentation.* | | | | |
| International award for Liveable Communities (LivCom) | International (1997) | Promote best practice in ‘liveable communities’ | Assessment uses a scoring system against 6 key criteria, which assessment is guided by a helping text for interpretation of each key criterion. | Expert assessment (subjective interpretation) in an open competition between cities in different countries. Assessment based on a desktop study of applicants’ materials/presentations. | |
| *Key criteria examples:* | *1) Enhancement of the Natural and Built Landscapes, 2) Arts, Culture and Heritage, 3) Environmental Best Practices, 4) Community Participation and Empowerment, 5) Healthy Lifestyle, and 6) Strategic planning.* | | | | |
| Forest Steward ship Certification (FSC) | International (1993) | Ensure sustainable forest production | Complex assessment and scoring system based on ten main principles, 52 main criteria and 171 sub-criteria. | Expert assessment (objective and subjective) against a standard (a minimum score) of forest management based on a desktop study and field visit. | |
| *Key criteria (principles) examples:* | *1) Comply with laws and regulations, 2) Ensure workers’ social and economic wellbeing, 3) Ensure indigenous peoples’ rights, 4) Ensure local communities’ social and economic wellbeing, 5) Ensure long term economic viability and environmental and social benefits, 6) Conserve and/or restore ecosystem services and environmental values, 7) Ensure updated management plans, 8) Achieve management objectives, 9) Ensure ‘High Conservation Values’, 10) Ensure management activities are consistent with principles and criteria collectively.* | | | | |
| Yardstick, Parkcheck | New Zealand (2001) / International (currently) | Provide information for and benchmark management | Assessment uses a relatively complex benchmark and scoring system based on 7 key criteria and 62 sub-criteria. | Expert assessment (objective and subjective) based on performance information, desktop study and field visit. | |
| *Key criteria examples:* | *1) Provision, 2) Investment and efficiency, 3) Operational excellence, 4) Infrastructure management, 5) Strategic planning, 6) Environmental sustainability, and 7) Social benefits.* | | | | |
| *Note: The table provides a brief overview of different types of assessment schemes related to management of green areas. The schemes were used as inspiration for development and design of the NGSA.* | | | | | |

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| **Table 3.** The Nordic Green Space Award scheme’s system of key themes, main criteria and sub-criteria (source: adapted from NGSA, 2012b). | | |
| **3 key themes** | **10 main criteria** | **41 sub-criteria (shortened translations)** |
| **A.  Structure and general aspects** | A1.  Size, character and location | A1.1 Is the area of an appropriate size, character and structure regarding its main functions?  A1.2 Is the area well-placed in its overall urban context regarding its main functions?  A1.3 Is the area integrated in a larger coherent green structure?  A1.4 Is there outside nuisances that disturb the whole or part of the area? |
| A2.  Accessibility | A2.1 How is the accessibility to the area?  A2.2 How is the accessibility into the area?  A2.3 How is the accessibility within the area? |
| **B. Functionality and experience** | B1.  Recreational and social aspects | B1.1 Are recreational and social aspects prioritized in plans and strategies?  B1.2 What are the possibilities for use of the area through different seasons (winter/summer)?  B1.3 Are facilities sufficient to support the area’s recreational and social functions?  B1.4 Are there any unique or particular attractions / facilities in the area?  B1.5 Is the area offering a diversity of experiences? |
| B2.  Culture and history | B2.1 Are cultural/historical aspects prioritized in management plans or other documents?  B2.2 Is the area offering (frequent) cultural events?  B2.3 Is the area of cultural and/or historical importance?  B2.4 Is there art in the area? |
| B3.  Nature and biodiversity | B3.1 Are nature and biodiversity aspects prioritized in plans and strategies?  B3.2 Is biodiversity experienced when visiting the area?  B3.3 Are there any old and conservation-worthy trees in the area? |
| B4.  Landscape and aesthetics | B4.1 Are landscape and aesthetical aspects prioritized in management plans or other documents?  B4.2 Is the area’s design adapted to the existing urban environment / landscape?  B4.3 Is the area integrated as a consistent landscape?  B4.4 Are there any parts of the area of particular landscape or aesthetical value?  B4.5 Have aesthetical and sustainable materials been used in the area’s surfaces, inventory and/or facilities? |
| B5.  Environment and climate | B5.1 Are environmental aspects prioritized in management plans or other documents?  B5.2 Is maintenance operations environment ‘friendly’?  B5.3 Is the area adapted to local climate conditions? |
| **C.**  **Management and organisation** | C1.  Management | C1.1 Does the area have a separate strategic management plan that specifies overall visions, objectives and priorities?  C1.2 Is there ongoing information gathering about use and users?  C1.3 Are there any activities for involvement of users / citizens in the management/maintenance of the area? |
| C2.  Maintenance | C2.1 Are systems and standards for maintenance matching the intended functions and character of the area?  C2.2 Are staff trained and well-qualified?  C2.3 How is the cleaning standard in the area?  C2.4 Does the maintenance level match the area’s objectives for functionality, facilities and character? |
| C3.  Communication and information | C3.1 How is the general promotion of the area?  C3.2 Is multiple languages (non-native) used in the promotion and information?  C3.3 How well is the daily staff’s knowledge about overall visions and priorities for the area?  C3.4 How is the on-site information provision about the area? |
| *Note: The table provides an overview of the main structure as well as shortened reformulations of sub-criteria found in the full NSGA assessment scheme. The full scheme includes short guidelines for assessment of sub-criteria and assessment type (not included above).* | | |

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| **Table 4.** Guidelines for assessment of sub-criteria in the NGSA assessment scheme: six examples (source: translated from NGSA, 2012b) | | |
| **Sub-criteria** | **Assessment type** | **Assessment guidelines** |
| A1.1  Is the area of an appropriate size, character and structure regarding its main functions? | Desktop study (supplementary site visit) | Assess against the area’s desired main functions, e.g. a people’s park covering an entire city should have a certain size whereas a neighbourhood park would be smaller. Larger parks should offer a variety of experiences / activities. |
| A2.2  How is the accessibility into the area? | Site visit  (supplementary site visit) | Are entrances clear and easy to find? Are there sufficient entrances and are then evenly distributed? Are they attractive and is visitors welcomed? |
| B4.2  Is the area’s design adapted to the existing urban environment / landscape? | Desktop study and site visit | Is landscape features and qualities (e.g. water streams, marsh meadows, lakes, valleys, terrain, plants) used in the areas design? Will visitors get views of the landscape? Is the area integrated into the surrounding urban environment / landscape (e.g. is there visual links). |
| B5.3  Is the area adapted to local climate conditions? | Desktop study and site visit | Assess, based on documents, local climate plans, etc., whether the area has a role in climate adaptation. Is water diverted from nearby areas into the area, etc.? Are there many trees in the area which contribute to improve the local climate? Is there an active policy for tree stand conservation and regeneration? Are there water features and shade in the area that promotes use when it is hot? |
| C2.1.  Are systems and standards for maintenance matching the intended functions and character of the area? | Desktop study | Are systems and standards for maintenance described and known? Is the areas functions taken into consideration? Consider both green elements and facilities. |
| C3.1. How is the general promotion of the area? | Desktop study and site visit | Assess the overall promotion of the area, e.g. is the area promoted at a webpage and how is the provided information? Is information about the area up to date? Is there a clear contact to the authority at the webpage and other communication materials? Assess whether new technologies or innovative communication methods are used, e.g. apps that focus on specific target groups. |
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| **Table 5.** Test scoring by five judge teams of Rörsjöparken in Malmö, Sweden (source: adapted from NGSA, 2012a). | | | | |
| **Judge Team** | **Theme A** | **Theme B** | **Theme C** | **Final score** |
| I | 2.8 | 2.0 | 2.6 | 2.5 |
| II | 3.3 | 2.5 | 3.2 | 3.0 |
| III | 3.7 | 2.3 | 3.1 | 3.0 |
| IV | 3.6 | 1.8 | 3.2 | 2.8 |
| V | 3.3 | 2.2 | 3.3 | 2.9 |

Appendix

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| Chronological overview of key event in the NGSA development | | | |
| **Year / Month** | **Event** | **Activities** | **Place / location** |
| 2009 / 09 | Initial agenda setting | Introduction of the challenge to rethink quality in the sector at national professional conference for the sector in Denmark (participation from Norway and Sweden). | City of Aarhus, Denmark. Host: National association of park and nature managers in Denmark. |
| 2009 / 12 | Pilot workshop | Two-day workshop with focus on rethinking quality. | Odense, Denmark. Host: City of Odense. |
| 2010 / 02 | Formative partner workshop | Initiation of the NGSA partnership and suggested work schedule. Input to the partnership on various ways of conceptualizing quality and quality assessment. | Copenhagen, Denmark. Host: University of Copenhagen. |
| 2010 / 04 | Promotion activities | Presentation for the Swedish sector, National conference for park managers. | Stockholm, Sweden. Host: National association for city park management in Sweden (FSS) |
| 2010 / 05 | Nordic coordination | Lead partner meeting | Oslo, Norway: Host: national association for outdoor recreation management in Norway (Bad, Park & Idrett). |
| 2010 / 08 | Promotion activities | Agenda setting and meeting with key stakeholders in Norway. | Oslo, Norway: Host: national association for outdoor recreation management (Bad, Park & Idrett). |
| 2010 / 09 | Partner workshop | One-day workshop on quality assessment. | Copenhagen, Denmark. Host: University of Copenhagen. |
| 2011 / 01 | Partner workshop | Two-day workshop. Set up of six formal work groups each with a different responsibility for the project and each with participation from all Nordic countries. | Copenhagen, Denmark. Host: University of Copenhagen. |
| 2011 / 01 - 2012 / 11 | Work group activities | Self-organized activities in all workgroups. | Various meetings in Denmark, Norway and Sweden. |
| 2011 / 09 | Partner workshop | One-day workshop. Status on progress and workgroup presentations / meetings. Theme on ‘something special’ places. | Copenhagen, Denmark. Host: University of Copenhagen. |
| 2011 / 12 | Nordic symposium | Two-day event with open symposium on quality and subsequent reflections and workgroup meetings. | Copenhagen, Denmark. Host: University of Copenhagen. |
| 2012 / 04 | Partner workshop | Two-day event with test of first full draft scheme in a neighbourhood park and workgroup presentations / meetings. | Malmö, Sweden. Host: City of Malmö. |
| 2011 / 04 – 2011 / 06 | Local pilot tests | Local pilot tests of draft scheme in all participating authorities (14 municipalities and 1 state agency). Individual feedback to workgroups. | All participating authorities in Denmark, Norway and Sweden. |
| 2012 / 09 | Award event | First award event of a green space in connection with national professional conference in Denmark. | City of Aalborg, Denmark. Host: National association of park and nature managers in Denmark. |
| 2012 / 11 | Final partnership meeting | Presentation of final products (NGSA handbook) and schedule for full implementation in the Nordic countries. Consensus on new partnerships agreement for the subsequent implementation phase. | Oslo, Norway. Host: national association for outdoor recreation management (Bad, Park & Idrett). |
| 2013 / 04 | First judge course | First completed two-day open course in NGSA assessment. First group of certified judges (11 from Denmark, 6 from Norway and 8 from Sweden). | Copenhagen, Denmark. Host: Danish national outdoor council |