

MAG Principles

Ending Violence Against Women and Girls through the Built Environment



MINISTERIAL ADVISORY GROUP
ARCHITECTURE AND THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT
FOR NORTHERN IRELAND



About this series

The Ministerial Advisory Group (MAG) is producing a series of short documents that examines our built environment and identifies important design issues that we need to address in making our cities, towns, villages and rural communities better places to live, work and play. How do we protect and create the best built environment? This document considers how we design built environments to ensure safety and prevent violence against women and girls.

This document is informed by international research demonstrating how structural inequalities are embedded within the design of everyday systems. Caroline Criado Perez's *Invisible Women* highlights how data gaps and gender-neutral planning have historically overlooked women's lived experience in transport, infrastructure, and public space.

Complementing this, the United Nations' *Safe Cities and Safe Public Spaces for Women and Girls* programme provides global evidence that gender-responsive urban design, community participation, and improved public realm management can significantly reduce harassment and improve perceptions of safety.

This document illustrates key principles that help create public spaces that are sustainable, support the economy and improve our well-being. To do this, MAG has documented three case studies which illustrate practical design principles advocated by MAG.

The MAG Principles documents are structured around three key themes:

Sustainability: Reducing the environmental impact and carbon output when designing, building, refurbishing, and maintaining our built environment.

Economy: Supporting wealth-generating activity that attracts investment, provides meaningful employment for everyone and makes goods accessible.

Well-being: Creating a built environment that supports human health and happiness.

Good design is not enough. Great places to live require stewardship, which means that everyone from home occupiers to property managers need to contribute positively to creating vibrant, safe, beautiful, and practical places to live. Great design should facilitate these characteristics.



Urban space, arial view, of a street with buildings, trees and shrubs

Image: @Shutterstock

Introduction

Violence against women and girls (VAWG) remains a pervasive global challenge. An estimated 1 in 3 women (30%) aged 15-49 years old have experienced physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence in their lifetime, and tens of thousands of women are killed each year by partners or family members, on average over 137 women daily.

In the UK and Ireland, national data reflect similar patterns of gendered violence. Recent publications by The Executive Office in relation to the Ending Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy (EVAWG) shows in Ireland, 88% of intimate partner violence victims are women, with violence often recurring over time. In the UK, independent analysis from Femicide Census shows that a substantial majority of homicide victims are women killed by male partners or ex-partners.

Northern Ireland faces a disproportionately high burden of femicide relative to its population size, reflecting entrenched patterns of gender-based violence within domestic and community settings. In the five years from 2020/21 to 2024/25, there were 30 female victims of homicide in Northern Ireland. This context underscores the need for integrated, cross-sector policy responses that address both the structural drivers and spatial manifestations of VAWG.



Woman walking alone at night

Image: ©Pexels

The Importance of the Built Environment

The built environment plays a vital role in shaping how people move, connect, and experience public life. For women and girls, the design and management of our streets, parks, buildings, and transport systems directly influence whether these spaces feel safe, accessible, and welcoming. Yet across Northern Ireland, evidence shows that too many women and girls continue to navigate public spaces under the shadow of fear or threat of violence.

The vision of this document is to ensure that the built environment in Northern Ireland becomes genuinely safe, inclusive, and equitable, enabling women and girls to travel to and through their communities freely, without fear or limitation, and makes a meaningful contribution towards the EVAWG Strategy. A safer environment benefits everyone: it supports wellbeing, strengthens social cohesion, and promotes economic vitality. When women and girls can comfortably and visibly occupy public space, through walking, resting, meeting friends, or engaging in civic life, the entire community becomes more vibrant and resilient.

Design and planning can help address this challenge. Through thoughtful spatial design, visibility, lighting, access, and inclusive engagement, architects, landscape architects, planners, and designers can play a critical role in reducing risk and fostering environments where women and girls feel a sense of belonging and safety. This document sets out the principles and practical actions needed to embed gender-responsive design at every level of the built environment across Northern Ireland.



Young people playing outdoors

Image: ©Stephanie_Wynne

Why it Matters

Sustainability

A safe and inclusive built environment is fundamental to sustainable communities. When women and girls feel unsafe, their use of public space is reduced, limiting active travel, social interaction, and engagement with local environments. In Northern Ireland, many women and girls alter their movement due to fear, choosing busier routes, avoiding certain spaces, or limiting travel after dark. This constrained mobility undermines efforts to promote sustainable transport and reduce car dependency.

Embedding safety through lighting, visibility, connected routes, and maintenance supports more consistent use of public space. A community-focused, commons-based approach further strengthens sustainability by encouraging local stewardship, shared responsibility, and long-term care of the public realm.

Economy

Perceptions of safety influence economic participation and vitality. When women and girls cannot move freely, access to employment, education, retail, and leisure is restricted, particularly within the evening and night-time economy.

Gender-responsive design supports inclusive economic activity by enabling safe access to workplaces, transport, and commercial centres. Mixed-use environments, active frontages, and well-managed spaces increase footfall and support local businesses. Findings from Safer

Streets, Shared Voices highlight the importance of well-designed, maintained spaces in sustaining confidence and activity.

Investment in safer environments is therefore both a social and economic priority, contributing to vibrant centres and inclusive growth.

Wellbeing

Safety is a key determinant of health and wellbeing. Fear of violence limits access to outdoor space, physical activity, and social life. Marginalised groups, including disabled women, refugees, minority ethnic women, and those in rural areas, face compounded barriers such as poor lighting, limited transport, and isolated routes.

The built environment can act as a preventive tool. While Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) focuses on surveillance and access, gender-responsive approaches recognise that safety is also shaped by perception and lived experience. Key factors include well-lit, open spaces, clear sightlines, visible exits, effective maintenance, and inclusive co-design.

Combining CPTED with gender-responsive, intersectional design and meaningful consultation supports confidence, autonomy, and belonging. A commons-based approach further enhances wellbeing by fostering social cohesion and shared ownership, embedding safety as both a spatial and social outcome.

Mapping the Problem in Northern Ireland

In Northern Ireland, 98% of women surveyed aged 18 and over and 73% of girls surveyed aged 12-17 have experienced at least one form of violence in their lifetime. Around 16% report their most serious incident occurring in public spaces such as streets, parks, or public transport. These figures reveal both the scale of harm and the urgent need for prevention.

These figures reveal both the scale of violence and the profound impact it has on everyday mobility and wellbeing. Fear of crime restricts how women and girls move through their communities, often leading them to alter routes, avoid certain areas, or limit their participation in public life.

The issue is compounded by geographical and social inequalities. Women in rural areas often face poor lighting, long travel distances, and limited public transport. Marginalised groups, including disabled women, refugees, and women from minority ethnic backgrounds, experience layered vulnerabilities.

Preventing VAWG is therefore not solely a policing or social issue but a spatial one. The design, planning, and stewardship of the built environment can either reinforce risk or actively reduce it, shaping how safety, visibility, and belonging are experienced every day.



Well-lit park

Image: ©Pexels

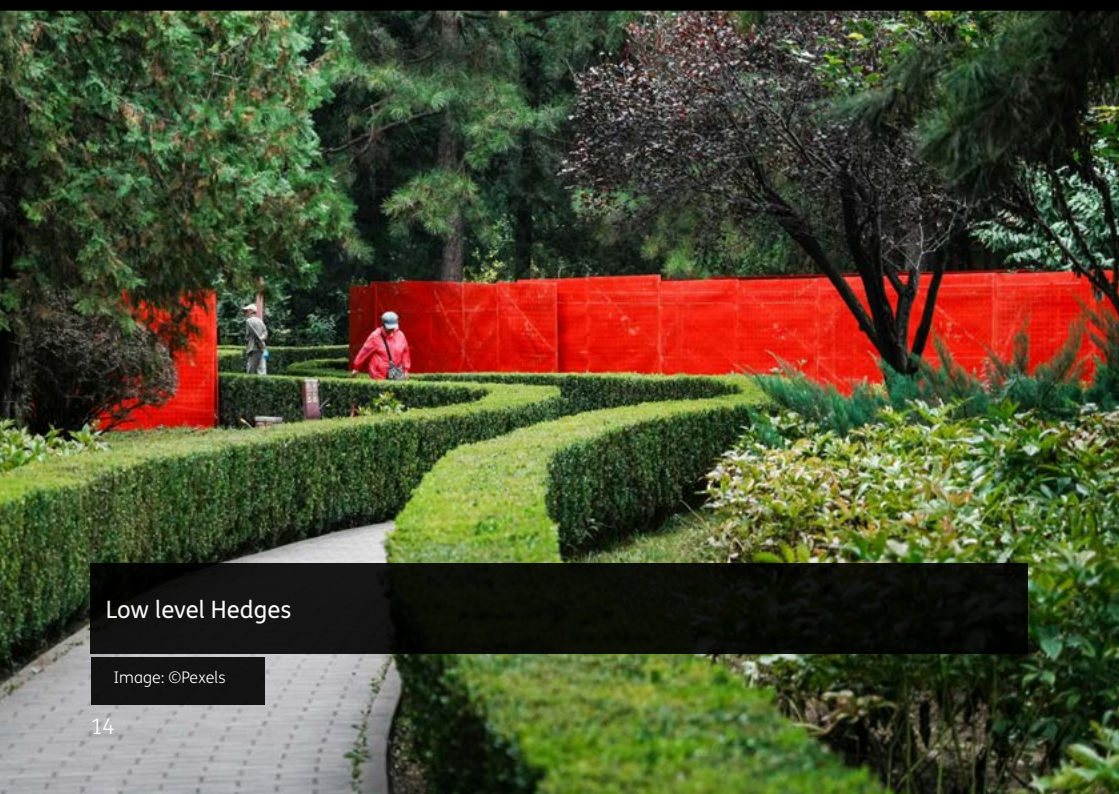
Principles for Designing Safer Places

Designing environments that feel safe, inclusive, and welcoming for women and girls requires more than technical compliance - it demands empathy, awareness, and participation. The following principles translate gender-responsive urban design into practical spatial strategies. They combine evidence from local research with international best practice to guide architects, landscape architects, planners, designers, developers, and local Councils in shaping safer public spaces across Northern Ireland.

1. Safety Through Visibility and Lighting

Visibility and appropriate lighting are the foundations of safety in the public realm. Poorly lit or visually enclosed areas increase anxiety and risk, particularly for women travelling at night.

- **Even, layered lighting:** Provide consistent, human-scale lighting across streets, paths, and entrances to avoid glare, deep shadows, or pockets of darkness. Warm-tone LEDs help create a comfortable, welcoming atmosphere while supporting facial recognition and orientation.
- **Clear sight lines:** Maintain open views and low or transparent boundaries (≤ 1.2 m). Avoid solid walls or tall vegetation that obscure visibility. Regular pruning and clear setbacks around corners, entrances, and transport stops can significantly reduce fear and improve wayfinding.



Low level Hedges

Image: ©Pexels

- **Multi-sensory cues:** Combine tactile paving, gentle ground lighting, and visual markers to enhance accessibility for all users, including those with visual impairments.
- **Hospitality link:** Outdoor seating, terraces, and pavement cafés can act as informal surveillance points when well-lit and visually permeable, extending natural activity into the evening and contributing to a shared sense of safety.

2. Encouraging Activity, Presence and Everyday Surveillance

People make places feel safe. The presence of activity, movement and social interaction throughout the day and across seasons is central to creating secure, inclusive environments. Urbanist and author Jane Jacobs argued that streets feel safer when more people can see what is happening around them, what she called “eyes on the street”.

Contemporary gender-responsive urban design recognises that safety is not achieved solely through passive observation from adjacent buildings. Instead, it relies on sustained, visible activity and continuous patterns of movement that animate streets and public spaces over time

Crucially, perceptions of safety shift between day and night and across seasons. A street that feels comfortable at lunchtime in summer may feel isolated in winter darkness. Design must therefore consider lighting, programming, and land-use



People socialising in a well-lit urban park at night

Image: ©Pexels

patterns that function cohesively across daylight hours, evening periods, and seasonal change.

- **Active frontages and natural surveillance:** Orient windows, entrances, balconies, and shared spaces toward streets and parks. Avoid rear façades and gables, recessed doorways, or concealed service areas. However, surveillance should not depend on domestic presence alone; it must be supported by active ground-floor uses and public-facing functions.
- **Mixed-use and zoning strategy:** Plan neighbourhoods and city centres so that residential, commercial, civic, and cultural uses operate in tandem. Zoning and regeneration strategies should promote regular pedestrian movement across the day, ensuring that daytime retail, civic services, and nighttime hospitality reinforce rather than replace one another.
- **Movement-led safety:** Design for continuous pedestrian flow rather than isolated nodes of activity. Safe environments are shaped by visible, legitimate movement, commuters, families, visitors, which reduces isolation and enhances collective confidence.
- **Hospitality and night-time economy:** The evening economy plays a critical role in sustaining presence after dark. Bars, restaurants, hotels, and cultural venues can operate as visible safe spaces when staff are trained to recognise risk, offer support, and coordinate safe transport. Initiatives such as “Ask for Angela” and Safe Place Campaign by PSNI should be embedded as standard practice within licensing and management frameworks.

These approaches shift the emphasis from passive surveillance alone to a broader model of activity, continuity, and shared presence as foundations of public safety.



Accessible park information signage



Park info sign and nighttime illuminated sign – wayfinding

Image: ©Pexels

3. Enhancing Legibility and Wayfinding

A space that is easy to read and navigate fosters confidence. Clear, consistent wayfinding empowers women and girls to make choices about their routes and movement.

- **Clear signage:** Use intuitive, well-lit directional signage, identifiable landmarks, and coherent design language across districts.
- **Multiple routes:** Offer visible, direct choices for entering and exiting public spaces to increase autonomy and control. Avoid designs that force single narrow routes or dead ends.
- **Connected paths:** Provide continuous, circular routes in parks and link these to public transport stops with consistent lighting and surfacing.
- **Digital integration:** Co-develop safe-route mapping and feedback tools with women's organisations to capture lived experiences and direct future improvements.



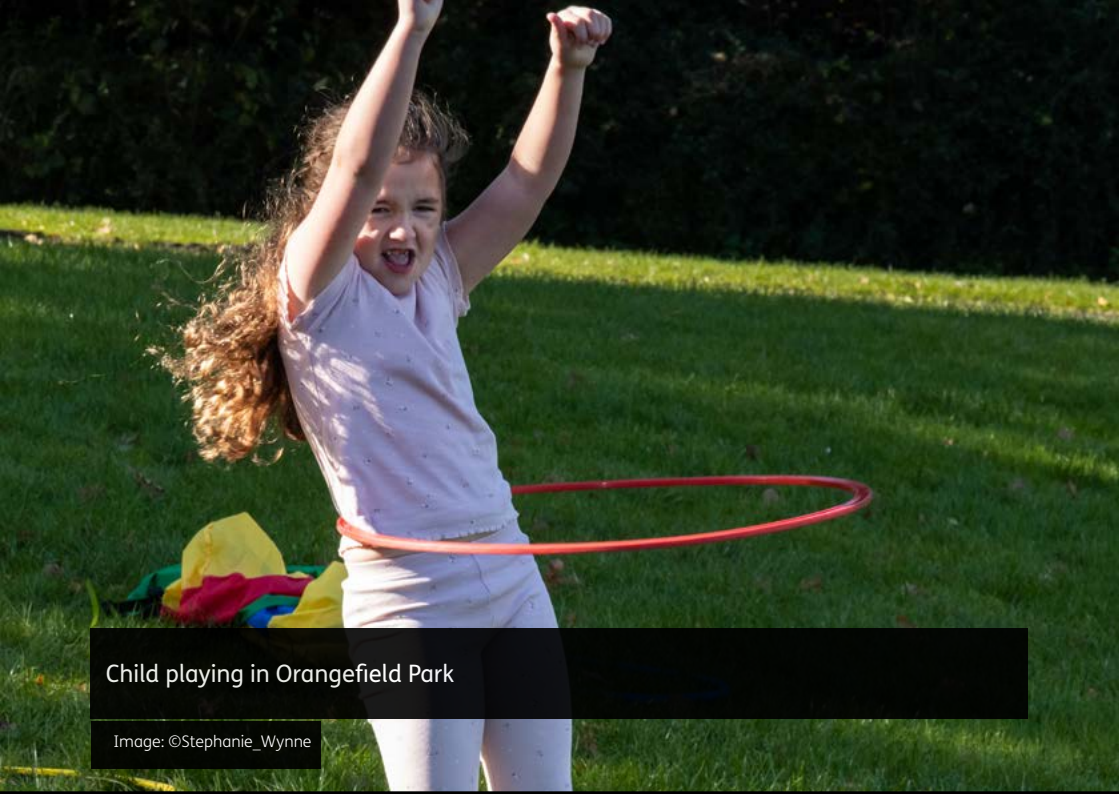
Community engagement in Orangefield Park, Belfast

Image: ©EastSide Partnership

4. Prioritising Maintenance and Cleanliness

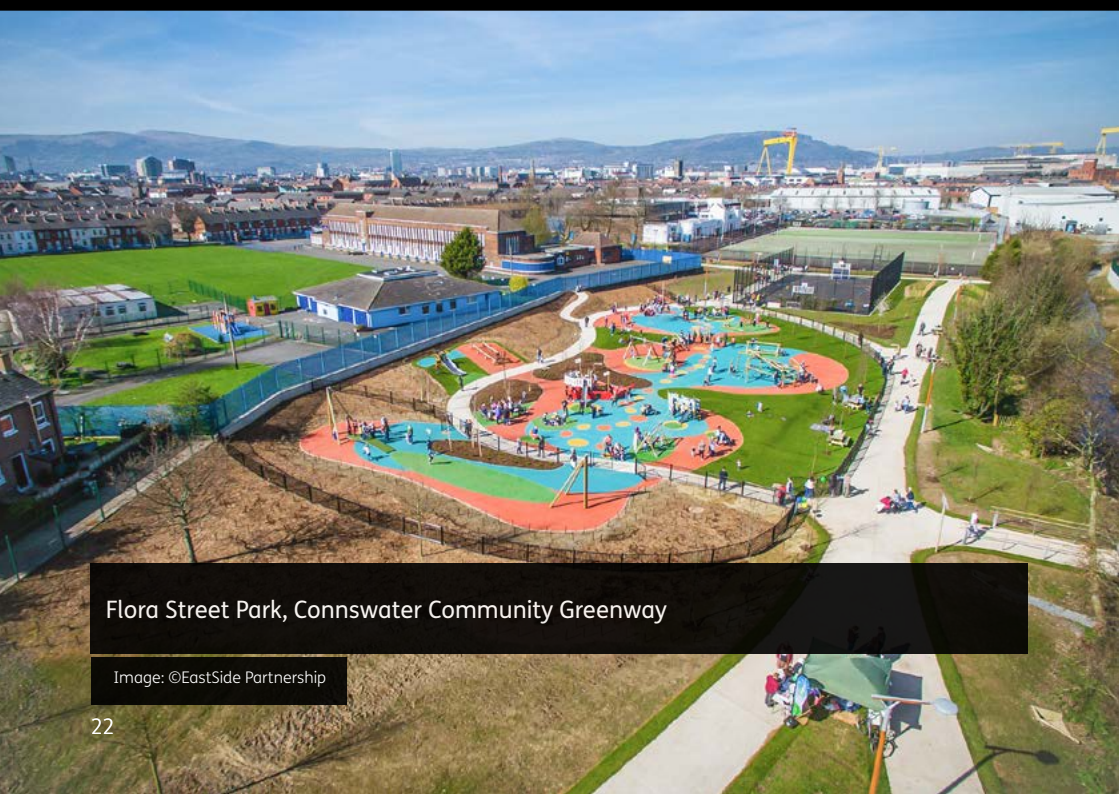
A well-maintained place communicates care, ownership, and vigilance. Neglect such as broken lights, litter, or vandalism, can signal that antisocial behaviour is tolerated.

- **Regular upkeep:** Establish routine inspection of lighting, pavements, fences, and vegetation. Maintenance should be seen as an investment in community wellbeing, not a discretionary cost.
- **Rapid response:** Create local reporting systems or digital apps for graffiti, litter, or damage. Quick repair and cleaning reinforce safety and civic pride.
- **Community stewardship:** Encourage local groups, residents, or nearby hospitality venues to “adopt a space,” maintaining planting, lighting checks, or seasonal decoration. Collective care increases attachment and oversight.



Child playing in Orangefield Park

Image: ©Stephanie_Wynne



Flora Street Park, Connswater Community Greenway

Image: ©EastSide Partnership

5. Designing for Inclusivity

Inclusive design ensures that women and girls of all ages, abilities, and backgrounds can occupy and enjoy public spaces with comfort and dignity.

- **Multigenerational and sensory spaces:** Incorporate varied seating types, accessible play areas, dropped kerb locations for push prams and wheelchairs, and sensory landscapes that appeal to a range of ages and abilities.
- **Inclusive toilets:** Provide clean, safe, and accessible public toilets near active zones. Their visibility and proximity to cafes or community hubs improve perceived safety.
- **Spaces for teenage girls:** Design semi-enclosed areas with flexible furniture and age-appropriate activities co-designed with young women. Research shows that teenage girls often retreat from parks and streets if spaces cater only to boys or children.
- **Hospitality sector:** Work with local venues to offer safe waiting zones or access to toilets after hours, especially near transport nodes or event spaces.



Participants engaged in co-designing safer transport environments for women and girls as part of Queen's University Belfast's Safe Travels research

Image: ©Queen's University Belfast

6. Ensuring Inclusive Co-Design

Meaningful engagement with women and girls is essential for creating spaces that reflect lived experience. Design must be participatory, transparent, and inclusive.

- **Meaningful community consultation:** Meaningfully engage diverse groups of women, girls, and gender-diverse people at every stage, from site analysis to post-occupancy review.
- **Intersectional participation:** Remove practical barriers to involvement by providing childcare, travel vouchers, and translation services. Ensure representation across age, ethnicity, disability, and socioeconomic background.
- **Accessible representation:** Ensure design data and engagement tools are tailored appropriately to each community to encourage active participation in the design process and thorough understanding of the proposed intervention.
- **Feedback loops:** Communicate outcomes of consultations clearly and publicly, explaining how community input has shaped decisions. Visibility builds trust and accountability.

Together, these principles form a framework for embedding safety, inclusion, and wellbeing within Northern Ireland's built environment. They move beyond risk reduction toward a proactive vision of equitable public life where women and girls feel visible, confident, and free to participate fully in the places they inhabit.



Participants engaged in co-designing safer transport environments for women and girls as part of Queen's University Belfast's Safe Travels research

Image: ©Queen's University Belfast

Strategic Interventions and Recommended Actions

Creating safer, more inclusive environments for women and girls requires collaboration across planning, housing, transport, design, and hospitality in private, public and third sectors. The following recommendations for key stakeholders aim to embed gender-responsive urban design as standard practice across Northern Ireland's built environment.

1. Local Councils and Planners

Local Councils play a pivotal role in setting the vision, standards, and regulatory frameworks that shape urban and rural environments.

Embed safety and equality in planning policy:

- Integrate VAWG prevention objectives within Local Development Plans, regeneration frameworks and design briefs prepared by Councils and Planning.
- Require Gender Equality Impact Assessments and Safety Audits for public realm proposals, ensuring that projects demonstrate how they address women's safety and inclusion. (Project Initiation)

Strengthen community safety consultation and accountability:

- Incorporate community safety consultation as a formal component of pre-application and statutory community consultation processes. Engagement should go beyond design aesthetics and seek to understand lived experience, local knowledge, and perceptions of safety across different times of day and year. (Planning)

- Ensure consultation includes diverse groups of women and girls, and reflects intersectional considerations including age, disability, ethnicity, and rurality. (Project Initiation)
- Establish a clear feedback loop with communities, documenting how concerns raised have influenced design decisions. (Project Initiation)
- Require applicants to summarise community safety engagement outcomes and design responses within the Design and Access Statement (or equivalent planning submission documentation), providing transparency and accountability at planning stage. (Planning)

Invest in safer infrastructure:

- Fund retrofitting of key pedestrian and cycling routes with co-designed lighting, landscaping, and visibility improvements. (Project Initiation)
- Prioritise links between residential areas, public transport stops, and community amenities for safety upgrades. (Project Initiation)

Collaborate and lead:

- Convene design workshops involving women's organisations, and local communities to co-develop place-based safety priorities. (Project Initiation)
- Initiate a gender-responsive Design Review to consider a safe and secure built environment.

BUS STATION/ SHELTER

More bus station
shelters with lights

At bus stop
- poor lighting at
most
- unwanted attention
(e.g. staring)

SEATING
...
over in 4...
organise a...

INFRAST

Participants engaged in co-designing safer transport environments for women and girls as part of Queen's University Belfast's Safe Travels research

Image: ©Queen's University Belfast

2. Housing Associations and Developers

Residential settings shape how women and families experience safety from the threshold outward. Housing providers and private developers have a unique opportunity to embed inclusivity at neighbourhood scale.

Design for natural surveillance and belonging:

- Avoid layouts with long, unsupervised corridors, isolated decks, or poorly lit entrances.
- Position communal spaces, mail areas, and cycle stores where they are visible and accessible.
- Consider diverse housing models that incorporates co-housing and intergenerational living to support a safer public realm and avoid isolation.

Create inclusive shared environments:

- Provide multi-use courtyards, seating zones, and playgrounds that are visible from surrounding homes to encourage everyday social presence and not dominated by vehicular movement, parking or turning heads.
- Ensure design accommodates people of all ages and abilities through accessible paths and universal wayfinding.

Advance beyond compliance:

- Supplement “Secured by Design” standards, or develop new standards, with gender-responsive safety audits that consider fear of crime, visibility, and inclusivity.
- Require resident feedback as part of post-occupancy evaluation to assess perceived safety and wellbeing and ensure information is used to inform future design proposals.

3. Transport Infrastructure Agencies

Connectivity determines access to work, education, and social life. When women and girls do not feel safe travelling, their opportunities shrink.

Safe and accessible transport stops should be designed to:

- Ensure that bus stops are retrofitted with transparent shelters, high-quality lighting, CCTV coverage, and clear emergency contact points.
- Ensure the location and placement of bus shelters are visually prominent, and benefit from natural surveillance.
- Provide seating and real-time travel information to reduce anxiety while waiting.

Connected, visible routes:

- Maintain well-lit, continuous walking and cycling paths at least 2m wide, ensuring they link to schools, workplaces, and community hubs.
- Eliminate dark underpasses or isolated footpaths through re-routing or lighting redesign.

Inclusive consultation and service design:

- Involve women's and youth organisations in decisions on bus stop locations, route planning, and timetable coordination.
- Pilot "safe waiting zones" at key interchange points, supported by hospitality or community partners.

4. Architects, Landscape Architects and Designers

Design professionals translate policy ambitions into lived experience. Their creative decisions determine how people perceive comfort, control, and safety in everyday settings.

Adopt trauma-informed, gender-responsive and human-scale design:

- Use warm materials (e.g., natural materials such as wood; earthy and natural colours), clear thresholds, and intuitive layouts that foster calm and predictability.
- Ensure clear lines of sight from entry to exit, avoiding concealed corners or abrupt transitions.
- Provision of a range of public spaces with varying layouts, architectural forms and mixed uses to encourage individual and group activities.
- Proportion and scale of handrails, seating, signage which have considered size and ergonomics of women and girls.

Integrate layered surveillance:

- Combine physical, social, and digital visibility through active frontages, transparent boundaries, and well-placed lighting, wifi or mobile phone coverage
- Use thresholds and gradations of space to signal belonging while maintaining openness.



Active nighttime economy

Image: ©Pexels

Treat safety as a design aesthetic:

- Elevate safety and inclusion as integral components of design excellence rather than security add-ons.
- Reference international exemplars such as Aspern Seestadt in Vienna (see Case Study 1), where gender-responsive planning has shaped inclusive housing, mobility, and open space networks at district scale.

5. Hospitality and the Night-Time Economy

The hospitality sector is uniquely positioned to extend safety and care into the evening hours, when fear of crime is most acute.

Create visible safe spaces:

- Encourage venues to display clear signage for initiatives such as “Ask for Angela” and Safe Place Campaign.
- Train staff to identify and support individuals at risk, offering discreet assistance and access to safe transport options.

Design for safety and openness:

- Use frontage lighting, transparent boundaries, and outdoor seating to animate the street edge and enhance visibility. Avoid visual barriers such as high fencing or tinted glazing that isolate activity from public view.
- Give careful consideration to the design of hospitality thresholds including entrances, canopies, recessed doorways, and sheltered waiting areas. Venues should provide well-lit, supervised transitional spaces where patrons can wait safely for transport without being required to step immediately onto potentially unsafe streets. The absence of adequate halting or waiting space can unintentionally force individuals to leave prematurely before safe travel home is available. Threshold design should therefore incorporate shelter, passive surveillance, clear sightlines, and appropriate maintenance to support safe departure, particularly during late-night hours and adverse weather conditions.

Collaborate across sectors:

- Establish partnerships between hospitality operators, transport providers, and local policing to coordinate night-time safety measures.
- Support late-night transport links and designated “safe waiting zones” near venues, particularly in rural towns and peri-urban areas.

6. Education and Capacity Building

For these principles to endure, capacity must be built across the professions and those with responsibility for shaping the built environment.

- Universities to integrate gender-responsive urban design into planning, architecture, and engineering curricula.
- Built environment professionals to undertake learning on safety, inclusion, and participatory design as part of the continual professional development.
- Document and share good practice from pilot projects and co-design workshops across councils and sectors.
- Support local research partnerships with universities to monitor the spatial dimensions of VAWG and track progress over time to inform future learning and improve project outcome.

Conclusion

Preventing violence against women and girls is not the responsibility of a single sector. It requires collective leadership, shared accountability, and sustained collaboration across planning, housing, transport, policing, health, education, and the night-time economy. Embedding gender-responsive urban design into policy and practice must move beyond reactive safety measures toward a proactive culture of visibility, trust, belonging, and shared stewardship.

This approach must also be underpinned by gender-sensitive and inclusive data collection and evaluation, methodologies that prioritise lived experience, intersectionality, and meaningful representation. Traditional datasets often reflect the status quo, focusing primarily on recorded incidents rather than everyday fear, constrained mobility, or spatial exclusion. A more inclusive evidence base should capture how women and girls experience form, space, design, governance, and consultation processes, ensuring that underrepresented voices shape both the definition of problems and the design of solutions.

Meaningful community consultation must be embedded at every stage of urban intervention, forming a continuous feedback loop between residents, practitioners, and decision-makers. Gender-based design principles should operate in tandem with CPTED, integrating physical safety strategies with social, participatory, and community-led approaches.

By combining robust data, inclusive engagement, and integrated design practice, Northern Ireland can create environments where women and girls move freely, confidently, and without fear, strengthening safety and quality of life for all.



Gender planning in Vienna

Image: ©Luiza Puiu

Case Study 1: Seestadt Aspern, Vienna

The Seestadt Aspern district in Vienna, Austria presents a compelling exemplar of gender-responsive urban design applied at a district scale. Spanning approximately 240 hectares, it is one of Europe's largest urban development projects and has integrated gender-mainstreaming as a core design principle.

Key features include:

- A commitment to “short-distance living,” with mixed residential, work, cultural, and social infrastructure located within a 15-minute walk.
- Street naming and public-space identity initiatives that centre women's contributions (e.g., the naming of squares and streets after notable women) to shift symbolic and physical environments.
- Built-form and public realm design sensitive to safety, visibility, and care-work demands: wider pavements for strollers, well-lit routes, accessible public transport, and reduced dominance of cars.

Lessons for Northern Ireland

When the built environment is shaped through a gender-responsive lens, explicitly recognising the movement patterns, safety concerns and care responsibilities of women and girls, it enhances liveability for all residents. A **Women and Planning Report by RTPI** summarises: “The creation of barrier-free, accessible, attractive, well-lit, well-equipped internal and external spaces has significant benefits for children, the elderly, disabled, as well as able-bodied men and women alike.”

In summary, Seestadt Aspern demonstrates that embedding gender-responsive design at the master-plan scale does more than improve safety: it creates a more cohesive, inclusive and resilient urban community.



Castlemilk Park

Image: Glasgow City Council

Case Study 2: Glasgow, Scotland, Advancing Gender-Responsive Public Space

Glasgow is emerging as one of the UK's leading cities in redefining its built environment through a gender-responsive lens. In 2022, Glasgow City Council passed a motion committing to making women, non-binary and gender-diverse people central to city planning, public realm design, policy and budgeting making Glasgow the first UK city to embrace this “feminist urbanism” approach.

Key elements of Glasgow's approach include:

- Funding of projects including improvements to lighting and safe access points in parks.
- Creation of a play design guide with emphasis on design with girls.
- Funding a feminist urbanism toolkit.
- A public art project called Mother Glasgow.
- Improvements in access to Castlemilk Park and Festival Park based on asks from consultations with local women.
- Provision of public toilets in public spaces.
- Maintenance and visible activation: A recent pilot initiative “City Centre Rapid Repairs” allocates funding for swift improvements to bollards, pavements, street furniture in key public routes.
- Night-time economy safety zones: The city's “Nite Zones” concept brings focused lighting, taxi marshals and community-safety patrols to major nightlife areas, enhancing safety for women after dark.
- Women's safety walks, carried out by local women's groups or the City Council, have been used to highlight issues and identify improvements.

Lessons for Northern Ireland:

Glasgow demonstrates that embedding gender-responsive design requires more than individual schemes. It involves institutional commitment, multi-sector collaboration, and a continuous feedback loop. A city-wide strategy that links planning, lighting, transport and night-time economy governance can produce more inclusive, resilient and safe public spaces for women, girls and other under-represented groups.



Cycling on the Connswater Community Greenway, Belfast

Image: @EastSide Partnership

Case Study 3: Connswater Community Greenway: 24/7 Opening and Lighting

The Connswater Community Greenway (CCG) in east Belfast is a 9km linear park with 16km of walking and cycling paths, created as part of a £40 million investment to transform connected green spaces across the city. Its continuous 24/7 opening and strategic lighting along key paths offer a strong example of how infrastructure design can support safer, more inclusive nighttime access for women and girls.

Key interventions:

The Greenway's opening hours policy was informed by community consultation and expert advice, noting that 24 hour access can increase safety by ensuring visibility and encouraging regular use, and that appropriate lighting reduces antisocial behaviour and supports perceptions of safety, leading to installation of lighting along heavily used corridors such as Marsh-wiggle Way and bridges including Sam Thompson Bridge.

Over time, the Greenway's winter use increased significantly, with 2,702 female users reported (during the observation periods) at baseline in 2011, compared to 7,949 at long-term follow up in 2025 showing a 194% increase (during the observation periods). A similar pattern was observed during evening times across both summer and winter, with 1,848 female users reported at baseline in 2010 and 2011, compared to 4,823 female users at long-term follow up in 2025, showing a 161% increase (during the observation periods). This significant increase in winter and evening usage, was supported by improved year round maintenance, accessible path design, step free bridges, and linked connections into surrounding neighbourhoods. Systems for Observing Play and Recreation in Communities (SOPARC) is a systematic and reliable observation tool used to understand how people engage with public spaces. Their evaluation has shown substantial growth in overall user numbers across the seasons, with

women making up a greater share of users over time, and winter activity increasing particularly in areas benefitting from lighting and improved accessibility.

Why it matters for women and girls' safety:

Extended visibility, clear sightlines, and predictable lighting along the main path network reduce common barriers such as fear of poorly lit routes, difficulties navigating uneven ground, or uncertainty about who else is present. Lighting at bridges, underpasses and narrow sections, combined with the Greenway's open design, helps create a sense of passive surveillance that supports walking, wheeling and cycling at dusk and in winter.

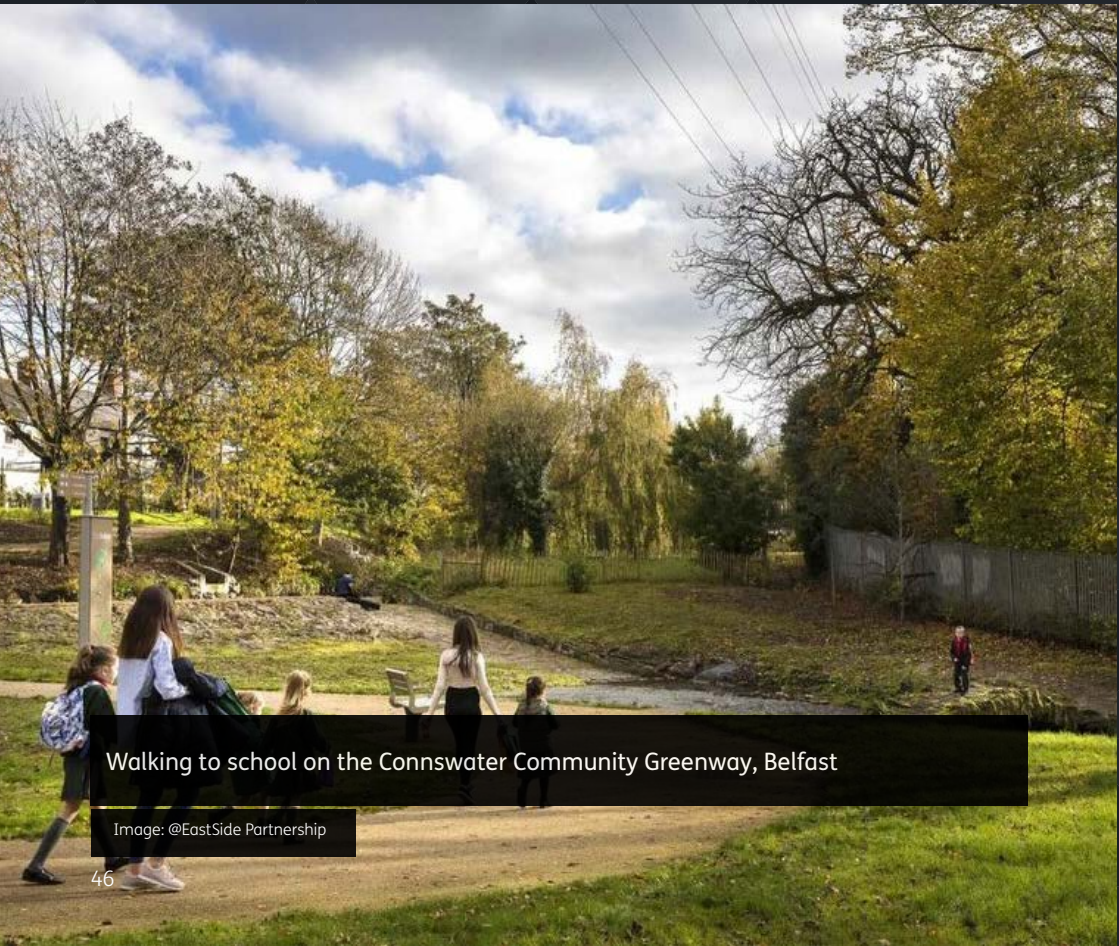
Removing barriers such as inaccessible gradients, unlit connectors, or pinch points aligns with findings from recent accessibility and inclusion studies, which emphasise the importance of reliable illumination and continuous routes for people with mobility aids, prams, or travelling in groups.

Lessons for design and management:

This case study illustrates the value of:

- Embedding lighting and 24/7 access in early planning, responding to community perceptions of safety and supported by crime prevention.
- Maintaining consistent, human scale lighting along priority corridors, including bridges and underpasses.
- Integrating accessibility improvements (wide paths, step free connections, clear signage) to enable safer movement for diverse users.
- Using ongoing evaluation, including citizen science research, to track seasonal use and ensure women and girls' needs are reflected in future upgrades.

In summary, the Connswater Community Greenway demonstrates how continuous opening hours combined with thoughtful lighting design can deliver more welcoming evening and winter environments, helping women and girls feel safer, more confident, and more visible as everyday users of urban green space.



Walking to school on the Connswater Community Greenway, Belfast

Image: @EastSide Partnership

Case Studies and Awards Recognition:

Case Study 1: Seestadt Aspern, Vienna

- Winner - Lee Kuan Yew World City Prize
- Winner - Austrian State Prize for Architecture and Sustainability in the category “Ensemble/Urban Space Creation and Networking“ 2019
- Winner - FIABCI World Prix d’Excellence 2019 and Prix d’Excellence Austria 2018
- Winner - immobilienmanager-Award 2018
- Winner - Austrian Developers’ Award (Bauherrenpreis) 2018
- Winner - VCÖ Mobility Award 2018
- Winner - World Smart City Award 2016

Case Study 2: Glasgow, Scotland, Advancing Gender Responsive Public Space

- Winner - Girls@COP26 Initiative

Case Studies and Awards Recognition:

Case Study 3: Connswater Community Greenway

- Winner - Edmund Hambly Medal, Institute of Civil Engineering, 2025
- Winner – Great Place Award, Academy of Urbanism, 2020
- Winner – President’s Award, Irish Landscape Institute, 2018
- Winner – Community Thriving Places Award, Urban Villages, 2018
- Winner – UK Rivers Prize, River Restoration Centre, 2018
- Winner – Social / Community Construction, CEF Construction Excellence, 2017
- Winner – Partnership, The Waterways Renaissance Awards, BURA, 2009
- Winner – Sustainable Planning Awards, RTPI / RSPB, 2008

Useful Guidance and References:

Case Study 1: Seestadt Aspern, Vienna

Aspern Seestadt

Gender planning in Aspern Seestadt

City of Vienna (n.d.a) Gender Mainstreaming Made Easy: Practical advice for more gender equality in the Vienna City Administration

City of Vienna (2008) Aspern Airfield Master Plan: Executive Summary

City of Vienna (2013) Gender Mainstreaming in Urban Planning and Urban Development

Case Study 2: Glasgow, Scotland, Advancing Gender Responsive Public Space

Scottish Construction Now: New rapid repairs project to help improve look and feel of Glasgow city centre

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Policy

MAG is here to implement and develop the Architecture + Built Environment Policy. All input from MAG will be aligned to current policy and emerging best practice.

Well-being, Sustainability and the Economy

The built environment is fundamental to the way we live our lives. Northern Ireland must confront a series of challenges in our built environment to help address the well-being of our people, the climate emergency and support of the regional economy. These challenges are not mutually exclusive and will be important underlying issues in the design review process.

