

Impact of Rural and Urban Definitions in the Belfast Hills



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Executive Summary:

- The purpose of this study was to seek better clarification of urban and rural definitions and the implications of these for the Belfast Hills Partnership.
- There is little departmental clarity with regards to what is rural. The situation is of particular relevance to the Belfast Hills as it fringes the urban centre of Belfast and the surrounding rural areas.
- The Department for Social Development's classification of the Greater Belfast Urban Area included the Belfast City Council Area and stretches around the Belfast Lough to include Carrickfergus to the North and Bangor to the South.
- The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development discounted the LGD definition with regard to the Belfast Hills and stated that their latest working definition of rural encompasses a population of approximately 4,500.
- There are issues associated with mapping out the boundary around the targeted settlement and therefore leaves the BHP unsure where they stand with regard the progression of a strategy or receiving potential funding.
- There are issues that can be placed within a rural or urban context; however, there are issues that can be attributed solely to the urban fringe.
- Barcelona as a European city contains unique similarities to the BMA in terms of issues associated with it's urban fringe; however, Barcelona is not situated in INTERREG's predefined Atlantic Rim.
- Similarities with other European countries are: Lisbon, Malmö, Porto and Vitoria Gastiez.

Introduction:

There is little departmental clarity with regards to what is rural. The situation is of particular relevance to the Belfast Hills as it fringes the urban centre of Belfast and the surrounding rural areas. Situated in limbo between both sets of definitions of rural and urban poses problems in terms of targeting and policy delivery. The Belfast Hills would be specifically affected by a key Department of Agriculture and Rural Development definition of rural as being those areas outside the conurbation of the Belfast Metropolitan Area.

The characterisations used by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Department for Social Development are defining some of the most sparsely populated and marginal agricultural land, of particular biodiversity value, as being urban. These definitions are of great importance to development as the European Union allocates the funding for rural development in relation to these definitions. There is an absence of a generally accepted definition of the term rural, leaving a situation where the only means of understanding the differentiation between urban and rural areas is to view the terms at opposite ends of a continuum, therefore raising the question of whether or not the idea of an urban fringe should be encompassed by governmental thinking.

The investigation carried out over that last four weeks has sought a definition of the urban fringe and tried to lay down unique characteristics that apply solely to its character. This involved an analysis of how or indeed whether the Belfast Hills identified needs and potential funding issues fit into a rural/urban framework or if they are specific to the urban/rural fringe (peri-urban). Due to the dependence on partnering European countries in order to achieve funding for such issues as those recognised in the Belfast Hills, research needs to be carried out in relation to what other countries within Europe, particularly along the Atlantic Rim (defined by INTERREG) had similar issues with reference to their urban fringe.

1 Definitions of Rural:

After meeting Ian McKee and Keith Morrison of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, the difficulties of defining rural are clear as different definitions have been applied to policy and strategy documents across the Government Departments in Northern Ireland (Figure 1). The process of defining rural has important implications for the Belfast Hills as some definitions include the majority of the area as urban.

For example, the Department for Social Development's classification of the Greater Belfast Urban Area included the Belfast City Council Area and stretches around the Belfast Lough to include Carrickfergus to the North and Bangor to the South. In addition the Department for Social Development's definition of the BMUA includes Castlereagh, Lisburn and Newtownabbey urban areas as well as Carryduff.

The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure define rural as all parts of Northern Ireland outside the Belfast Metropolitan Area and other towns with a population less than 4,500. The alternative Local Government District definition declared that the Local Government Districts of Belfast, Carrickfergus, and Castlereagh, Newtownabbey, North Down and Derry are considered urban while the other Local Government Districts are treated as rural.

These definitions provide issue for the Belfast Hills as most of it under these categories will be defined as urban. However, Keith Morrison outlined the definition of rural encompasses a population of approximately 4,500 and from this, settlements can be targeted. However, he claimed that given the complexity of rural areas and the degree of interaction between urban and rural, it is proposed that a flexible approach to defining rural areas be adopted using the following options:

1. Rural areas include the towns, villages, small settlements and open countryside outside the Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan and Derry Urban Area.
2. Rural areas include those areas outside the Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan, Derry Urban Area and larger towns with a population of 18,000 or more.
3. Rural areas are defined as settlements with a population of less than 4,500 inhabitants and their hinterlands
4. Rural areas are defined as settlements with a population of less than 2,250 inhabitants and their hinterlands.

Keith Morrison outlined that definitions of rural areas can be flexible depending on their spatial focus of the issue to be addressed and the targeted nature of the policy or programme. To this end, local development approaches and targeted rural initiatives will adopt a narrower definition (i.e. settlements with population of less than 4,500 inhabitants) and policy or programmes focusing on wider sub-regional issues will apply broader definitions. In essence, no specific single definition of rural areas or rurality in Northern Ireland is provided. There are issues associated with the drawing of a boundary around the settlement. The situation in the Belfast Hills will be influenced by this decision as it can be carried out on a ward basis, housing development limit, postcode, address or even a 30 mile an hour region. This lack of a single definition is problematic particularly in relation to the Belfast Hills as they are still unsure where they stand with regard to the progression of a strategy or receiving funding.

DEPT/ORG	DEFINITION	ADVANTAGE	DISADVANTAGE
DARD, DCAL	All parts of Northern Ireland outside the Belfast Metropolitan Area, City of Derry and other towns with populations greater than 5,000	Provides a focused/local approach by only including smaller settlements	Although they largely serve their rural hinterland, settlements with a population of over 5,000 are not considered rural. There is no indication of the rationale for identifying towns of 5,000 population
DoE	The total area outside the development limits of Belfast Urban Area, Derry, Carrickfergus and Bangor and all settlements having a population of 3,000 or greater	Provides a more focused/local approach by only including smaller settlements	Although they largely serve their rural hinterland, settlements with a population of over 3,000 are not considered rural. There is no indication of the rationale for identifying towns of 3,000 population
DRD	All the towns, villages, small settlements and open countryside outside the main urban areas of Belfast and Derry	Acknowledges the difficulties involved in providing a binary distinction between urban and rural based on population. As only the clearly defined urban areas are not considered rural – this recognises the interaction between larger settlements and rural areas	The regional approach does not specifically define rural areas or provide a clear rural focus for intervention or analysis
DHSSPS	The 20% most rural wards using the population density variable from the 2001 Census of Population	Provides a focused approach by only including the smaller settlements. The definition employs population density as the method of analysis, which is more appropriate for defining rural areas than population	No definition of rural is provided and the rationale for identifying 20% of the most rural wards is not clear
Interdepartmental Urban/Rural Definition Group	Classification of settlements	Acknowledges the difficulties involved in providing a binary distinction between urban and rural and provides a flexible approach to defining rurality to be used as appropriate	Classifies settlements in regard to more urban characteristics of population size, density and service provision and thereby denotes rural areas as those which are non-urban. No definition of rural areas or rurality in Northern Ireland is provided
RDC	Typology of rural areas based on land use and agricultural employment. Classification of a number of clusters in Northern Ireland on the basis of socio-economic data	Understands the complexity of rural areas in Northern Ireland. Provides a typology of rural areas based on the 'rural criteria' of land use	No absolute definition of rural areas is identified. Key demographic indicators (eg age structures, depopulation) used in the typology are largely the effect of rural problems and not their defining characteristic
Defining rural areas by population density and land use	Mapping rural areas in Northern Ireland on a ward basis in terms of population density and by workplace jobs per hectare. Development of a continuum charting the differentiation between urban and rural areas	Defines rural areas according to the more rural classifications of population density and the intensity of land use	Classifications are more definitive at the extreme ends of the data. It is difficult to draw boundaries and cut-off points in wards that have average scores. There is a need for more analysis to define and distinguish between these less distinctive wards

Figure 1 Rural Development Council (2003) A Picture of Rural Change/Rural Development Council (2002) a Picture of Rural Change

2 Urban Fringe in Relation to the Belfast Hills Context:

Conclusions drawn by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development that it is only possible to define rural areas at the more extreme end of the continuum with the distinction between urban and rural becoming more blurred thereafter brings with it the realization that a new vision and programme to realize the full social, economic and environmental potential of the urban fringe is required. The Belfast Hills contains many of the characteristics that make up the urban fringe and to date acts as a neglected and underutilized resource, where policies and initiatives have been fragmented and unco-ordinated.

The Countryside Agency (2003) defines the urban fringe as “that zone of transition which begins with the edge of the fully built up urban area and becomes progressively more rural whilst retaining a clear mix of urban and rural land uses and influences before giving way to the wider countryside.”

There are varying types of urban fringe (figure 2.1) and these spaces are vastly contested by planners, environmentalists, developers, local communities and land managers and owners. Degraded fringe and transitional fringe represented in figure 2.1 are illustrative of the peri-urban area associated to the Belfast Hills. For example, the conditions and trends of the conventional agricultural sector are governed by national and European policy imperatives, very few of which are specific to urban fringe circumstances. In many urban fringe areas, high quality land is conserved with little or no positive attention being given to the ability of that land to contribute to levels or types of production commensurate with its inherent capabilities.

The ability of farmers to adopt new crops or new flexible modes of production on the most favourable resource base is, therefore, often constrained by insensitive patterns of land use or urban social behaviour. There are perceived problems that are attributed to being situated on an urban fringe area, not to mention vandalism, theft, fly-tipping and trespass: negative attitude of

planners on account of their dedication to a green and pleasant approach versus the proposals for diversification to keep farmers in business; the need for grant aid; public complaints limiting agricultural enterprises; and difficulty in recruiting staff. This manifests itself in the Belfast Hills by the depressed state of agriculture and the mistrust between the agricultural sector and government departments. There is also major confusion concerning geographical limits to urban and rural regeneration.

Planning at the edge of Belfast has been concerned with containment and the planned separation of the rural and urban land uses and activities. However, there has been some inevitable blurring of these uses to create a unique landscape that has been defined as the urban fringe. Figure 2.2 is an initial attempt to illustrate that there are many issues within the Belfast Hills that are inherently rural as well as issues that are associated with inner city deprivation. However, there are characteristics that are associated solely to the urban fringe and the Belfast Hills.

The issue most pertinent in the Belfast Hills is that of waste management. A high proportion of waste that is created in Northern Ireland comes from the Belfast Urban Area and therefore landfill retains a key role in the government's waste strategies. Local authorities within Northern Ireland are continually looking to the urban fringe as a convenient location for future waste management facilities based mainly on landfill. The current permitted capacity for commercial and demolition waste in Belfast Hills is approximately 30% of the total commercial and demolition waste in Northern Ireland. If licence permits had been issued for Mullaghglass and Cottonmount the permitted levels for municipal waste in the Belfast Hills will be in the region of 66% of the total Northern Ireland level. These figures are not to mention illegal landfill waste where rough estimations of 150,000 tonnes per year in the Belfast Hills exist.

There is a lack of government response to this issue as the ideal areas for waste management (industrial, working and worked out quarries, existing landfill

sites, existing or redundant sites/buildings and sites previously occupied by other types of waste management facilities, or composting operations) are located on the urban fringe of the Belfast Hills. Landfill causes both physical and image problems at the urban fringe and will therefore have to be a major consideration in any future fringe strategy.

As well as the many problems and issues associated with the urban fringe there are also many benefits associated with its location. For example, there are markets directly at your door step, a large catchment for customer based enterprises, it has great value acting as a buffer zone to the built up area with benefits resulting from biodiversity and there are mixed advantages associated with recreation and landscape.

Figure 2.2 an attempt to define rural/urban fringe/urban land uses

	Rural	Urban Fringe	Urban
Quality of Life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Green open space - Cave Hill, Slievenacloy ASSI, Colin Glen Forest Park, Glenside Woodland, Divis and the Black Mountain, Legoniel, Carnmoney Hill, Hannahstown Hill and Throne Woodland. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Visual appeal degraded by landfill, heavy traffic and constant change and development. -Conflicting land uses produces degradation of land and possibly pollution. -Less public transport than in urban areas. -Good access to public spaces. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Good services access e.g. education, healthcare and housing. -urban renewal schemes. -Areas of high deprivation.
Farming issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Need to maintain agricultural land and retain farmers in the sector. -Diminishing farm incomes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Public lawlessness and attacks on farmers, families and stock. -Illegal dumping of waste. -Vandalism. -Less productive farmland with some rough grazing. -Horticulture significant. -Neglect and low investment. -Fear through threat of physical violence. -Drug abuse in farm buildings. -Machines and buildings burned 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Only occasional urban farms. -Potential for city farms. -Potential for open farms with visitor services. -Large urban population results in outside interference in farm affairs.

Natural and Built Heritage	<p>-Dry and wet heathland, acid grassland, neutral grassland, broadleaved woodland, lowland wood pasture and parkland, planted conifer woodland, boundary features including hedgerows, marsh, wet grassland and swamp.</p> <p>-Important species in the Belfast Hills - vascular plants, fungi and algae, lichens. Bryophytes, mollusca, anthropoda, fish, birds, amphibians, reptiles and mammals.</p>	<p>-Derelict quarries and associated land quarries, wasteland areas, gardens, parklands, ponds, school grounds and industrial land.</p> <p>-Hedgerow removal.</p> <p>-Road improvements to accommodate large Lorries.</p> <p>-Abandoned farmland.</p> <p>Ribbon development.</p> <p>-Factories, offices, business parks and warehouses.</p>	
Recreation	<p>-Walks.</p>	<p>-Legal landfill sites.</p> <p>-Illegal landfill sites,</p> <p>-Fly tipping sites</p> <p>-Dirt bike tracks.</p> <p>-Noisy/unsociable but non-recreational uses which depend on the presence of a large urban population.</p> <p>-Traveler's encampments.</p>	<p>-Community deprivation - need for economic regeneration, public transport access to recreation and the development of training and job opportunities needs to be part of the mix.</p>

Figure 2.1

Table 2.1 Types of Urban Fringe

Urban Fringe Type	Land Uses	Land Cover & Landscape Structure	Landscape Condition/ Management	Urban Influences	Character & Appearance
Rural Edge	Productive farmland Few/no urban related uses	Generally good with substantial vegetation cover	Well managed	Edge of settlement concealed or very well integrated	Attractive, generally varied appearance with high appeal
Rural Urban Fringe	Productive farmland Few/no urban related uses	Moderate with less cover; evidence of hedgerow loss	Generally well managed	Edge of settlement only partially concealed; where exposed may be intrusive	Attractive appearance but less appeal due to poorer landcover and variety
Transitional Fringe	Less productive farmland with some rough grazing. Urban-related uses present. Horticulture significant	Moderate to poor. Structure likely to be fragmented and neglected.	Variable management. Signs of neglect and low investment. Landscape generally moderate to poor condition	Significant urban influences, dominant infrastructure and largely unscreened settlement edges	Fragmented character; lack of unity. Run down appearance; low appeal
Degraded Fringe	Variable land uses inc. poor pasture, derelict land, tips, mineral workings, scrub	Generally very poor due to degradation and removal/ disturbance of landscape structure to accommodate other uses	Derelict to poor condition; predominantly unmanaged landscape	Urban edge may/may not be visible to different degrees. Non-conforming uses indicate urban influences	Degraded, derelict character. Predominantly unattractive with little or no appeal
Community Fringe	Predominantly managed recreational uses in defined areas	Good to poor, depending on use and age. May include existing industries and settlements	Generally well-managed appropriate to recreational uses. Landscape in good, moderate or poor condition depending on use and age	Variable between strong influence to little influence where urban edge is contained by landscape structure	Variable according to use and location e.g. strong character where defined landscape feature; weak character where open

Source: Baker Associates (2000) p.36

3 Links with European Cities in Relation to Urban Fringe:

There are very few cities that have documented issues with an urban fringe. During the investigation there were 40 cities studied; however, I have only outlined 5 cities in this report that may be of particular use to the Belfast Hills in relation to identifying solutions or possible partners. This then led to looking at cities within Great Britain, where, Manchester and Glasgow were recognised as areas that may offer possible solutions for the issues inhabiting the Belfast Hills.

3.1 Barcelona, Spain:

Barcelona contains unique similarities to the Belfast Metropolitan Region. In Barcelona, major economic, social and political changes have contributed to increased pressure on the urban fringe resulting in drastic land use changes. Governance in Barcelona possess little consensus on what constitutes the metropolitan region. Like the Belfast Metropolitan Area, Barcelona has numerous distinctive districts within its context that evolve from different social, political and economic histories.

In addition, the topography of the region has played an important part in influencing the evolution of the metropolitan form. The Collserola mountain space provides further similarities to the Belfast Metropolitan Area. Collserola is a natural mountainous space spanning 8,000 ha located in the centre of Barcelona. The area is characterised by garbage dumps, residue spaces, irregular vegetable gardens, badly embedded industrial estates and vehicle depots. There is particular relevance with concern to poor planning practice with regard housing developments as there was little care taken in embedding the industrial estate at the end of the slope (Figure 3.1.1), cutting streams, provoking a strong physical impact and an important alteration to the morphology of the territory without providing any type of solution to the wounds created. The area is also characterised by large amounts of waste which accumulates along the fringe (Figure 3.1.2). The regions principle aim is to weave a network of areas of

reception in the outskirts, therefore achieving from the most degraded areas, and growth of the park towards the city, especially there were the city requires it most, for example by, embedding the San Cugat Stream, the industrial estate, the slopes and the stone quarry into the overall plan for the parks development.

Urban sprawl has resulted in the development of low density detached housing on the urban fringe, where 70% of all housing on the fringe is detached. There has also been a rise in industrial and retail industries on the urban fringe resulting in a dominant level of rubbish dumps, wreckers, nurseries, gravel pits and quarries. Urban expansion has also contributed to a significant decrease in the area of agrarian land in the urban fringe from 80,000ha – 50,000ha. There is thus an increased trend in the abandonment of land resulting in utilization of the land for other purposes, such as, dirt bike racing. Developments have other impacts such as loss in biodiversity in agricultural land, degraded landscape, and abandoned plots that then become illegally occupied by squatters. There is consistent evidence that the increasing population has led to an increase in vandalism, trespassing and traffic volume which makes it difficult for farmers. There have also been alterations in the forest use. The urban growth in the metropolitan region, and its impact on rural landscapes, has been influenced by the planning system. The plans implemented over the last 50 years have tended to focus on issues of urban dispersion and containment.



Figure 3.1.1



Figure 3.1.2

3.2 Lisbon, Portugal:

The Lisbon Metropolitan Area is characterized by rapid urban sprawl. The area includes large patches of farmland comprised of olive, cork, and fruit orchards surrounding the mouth of the Tagus River. In the Lisbon Metropolitan Area there are intense urban pressures on the west side of the south margin of the Tagus River. Characteristic of the area is the spread of residential areas of low density, based upon car transport. The Cascais region of Lisbon illustrates the urban pressures on agriculture as housing demand and tourism as well as recreational activities, such as; climbing, driving of four wheel drive vehicles and hunting all alter the agricultural landscape. These activities have resulted in environmental degradation of the land and loss in biodiversity. Figure 3.2.1 illustrates the urban pressure in Lisbon and therefore the new pressure that will be placed on the urban fringe by the proposed urban areas. This along with industry and industry proposed illustrates the pressure on agricultural and forested lands.

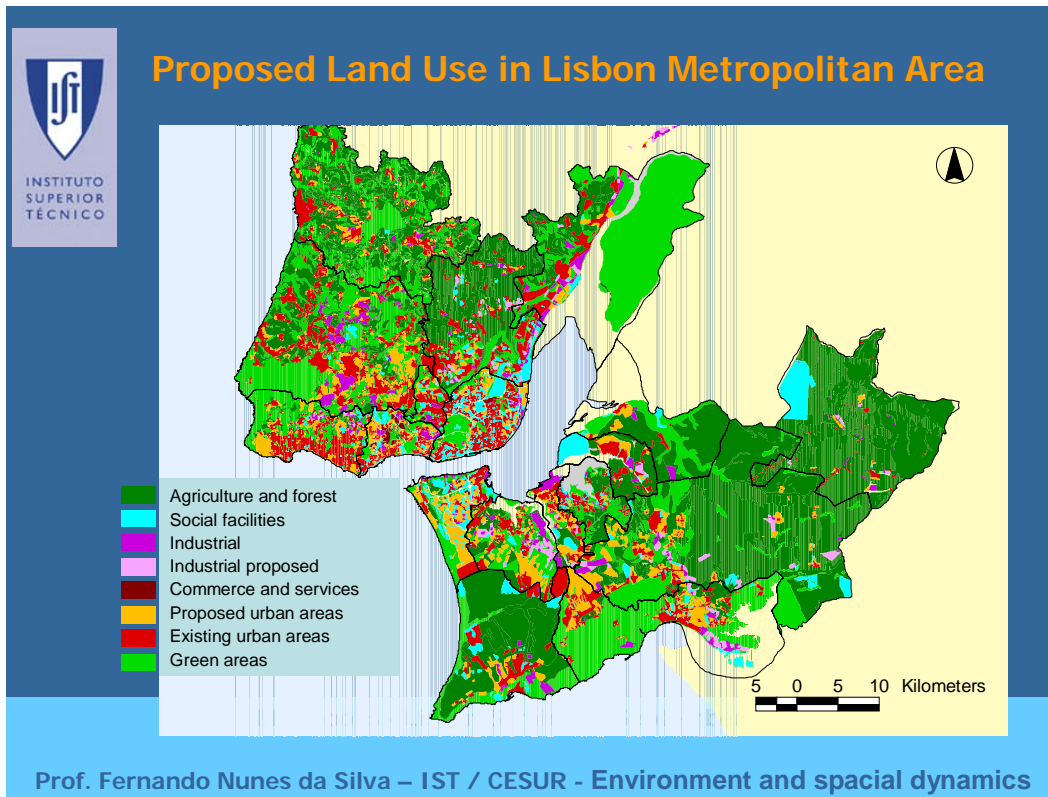


Figure 3.2.1

3.3 Malmö, Sweden:

In Malmö the Southern most part of Sweden there is a conflict between urban growth and farming interests. There is the Gyllin's garden is a green space on the outskirts of Malmö that is regarded as one of the few 'wild places' within the urban area of Malmö. Gyllin's garden is partly surrounded by residential areas, and is used for leisure activities by people living in the neighbourhood. In the 1980s and 1990s the municipal comprehensive plans determined that the abandoned areas should be turned into a residential district, with the surrounding arable fields to the west and east designated for park and recreational purposes. Human impacts in this area are clearly visible as there are heaps of dirt, broken glass and pieces of brick found, as well as concrete fundamentals from previous structures covered by high grass, rusty fences hid behind hedges of lilac. The surrounding arable fields are to be turned into residential areas with multi-storey buildings.

The area named Toftanäs was assigned for industrial purposes 15 years ago. In this process three previous farms were pulled down when all the fertile topsoil was removed. In the detailed development plan, Toftanäs was basically treated as an empty space and in accordance with this plan, a new infrastructure with broad streets, water and power supply was created, ready to be used at any time. However, the southern part is still waiting future constructions. Due to this barren space, there is a substantial amount of litter, including; broken washing machines, a number of garbage bags, the remains of dismantled bicycles and serves as a place for illegal activity.

The area of Tullstorp is currently being planned to be one of the sites for Malmö's expansion, with about 600 new houses and apartments to be built in the coming twenty years.

3.4 Porto, Portugal:

In the Porto Metropolitan Area the urban pattern is concentrated among the main nuclei and scattered among many small rural towns and villages. A character of the Porto area is that there are very small isolated patches of intensive agriculture and pine forests within a topography of steep slopes. In the last 25 years the region has witnessed intense urbanisation that has been dispersed into different settlements having a wider impact on the agricultural landscape of the area. Whilst carrying out research there was very little information on Porto; however, it appears to be a suitable area in which the Belfast Hills could gain solutions to its issues.

3.5 Vitoria Gastiez, Spain:

There are many problems existing around the edge of Vitoria Gastiez similar to the Belfast urban fringe, such as: erosion, and other degraded spaces that threatened the survival of the remaining natural spaces. The generic planning criterion was to prevent the fragmentation of the natural spaces situated on the periphery of the city and to promote the physical and ecological

connectivity between them and the extensive system of green areas in the city and other natural spaces in the municipality, at a second level. The city is of particular relevance to Belfast as regions such as Zabalgana, Armentia and Lasarte are located between the City and the Mountains of Vitoria developing unique characteristics (Figure 3.5.1). Associated problems prior to the development of the green belt were associated with commercial activities, poor waste management, abusive felling of trees, gravel pits, degradations of the landscape, accumulation of rubbish, remains of bonfires and an excessive number of pathways and tracks and numerous flooded and eroded areas.

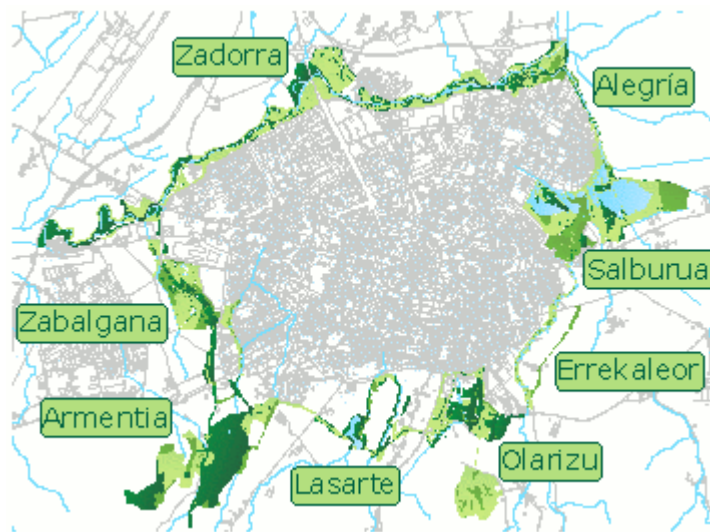


Figure 3.5.1

Conclusion:

- Possible funding Revenues:

- **INTERREG III** – community initiative which aims to stimulate trans – European co-operation.
- **COMET** – Six councils meet to attract funding.
- **Annual work programme for grants for which there exists a basic act in the environmental policy area on the 2006 Budget** – promotes NGOs primarily active in the field of environmental protection and enhancement at European level.

- **Cohesion and Structural Funds.**
 - **Lottery** – Awards for All.
- **PLUREL:**
- At present, work on peri-urban areas continues in EURMET Project (INTERREG III B SUDOE) – characterizes the peri-urban zone in terms of land use classes.
 - The Belfast Hills could be put forward as a case study for urban fringe issues.

Future work:

Although it will be a difficult task due to constant change in landscape use, the Belfast Hills would benefit greatly from the mapping of the urban fringe on the ground.

Gaining further insights into departmental thinking on the issues associated with urban fringe and possible ways forward.

The investigation of funding and possible partners within Europe could be the next step as attracting a partner with similar issues is extremely important in the process of solving the issues that exist on the Belfast Hills.

It will also be really useful to contact TADA Rural Network, one of the twelve rural support networks throughout the whole of Northern Ireland. Ciara Burns, the Community Project Worker has been in post since March 2006 and has developed working partnerships with the community, voluntary and statutory organizations to promote energy efficiency and tackle fuel poverty.

The Belfast Hills act as a unique landscape in which characteristics of the urban fringe have been identified. The government is yet to provide a clear definition of what is rural/urban and this leaves the Belfast Hills unsure in relation to what direction of progress that it should take.

There is scope for the Belfast Hills Partnership to take the lead in evaluating the fact that the urban fringe provides its own unique characteristics that are neither rural nor urban.

The task of finding a link European city is difficult but could be very rewarding, however, with the increasing pressure on rural land imposed by urbanisation there may be a great deal more interested in the topic.

The rest of the European studies can be found in a literature review that took place during the four week investigation. There is also a literature review containing the issues associated with definitions of urban, rural and urban fringe.