

# Classification framework for public open space



Building stronger, healthier, happier and safer communities.



Department of  
Sport and Recreation

## Acknowledgements

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## Foreword

The publication of consistent terminology for public open space is incredibly important. Our ever-expanding communities require open space for sport and recreation at a time in our history when population and living pressures are increasing. In Western Australia we have always taken the abundance of space for granted. Now, more than ever, careful planning of our playing fields and parks is required to ensure citizens are active and able to enjoy a quality mix of structured and natural environments. This planning must be undertaken across sectors, with all players sharing a common understanding of both open space function and terminology.



This framework is designed to achieve that consistency and reduce confusion. It is the result of hard work by many people across different agencies and disciplines. I commend both the body of work and the people involved. The challenge now is to not only continue to provide for our existing population, but to ensure a legacy of public open space for generations to come.

**Ron Alexander**  
**Director General**  
**Department of Sport and Recreation**  
**November 2012**

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## Introduction

Public open space (POS) can increase aesthetic appeal, amenity and value of a neighbourhood, suburb or regional area. Aside from providing places to play, be active or relax, public open spaces afford many benefits. Environmental benefits can be gained through protecting local biodiversity and visual landscapes, retaining ecological systems and linkages, and management of urban water. Social benefits can be gained through community interaction and activation of places for formal and informal sport and recreation. Cultural benefits can be gained through recognition and interpretation of Indigenous and historic values. Economic benefits can be gained through provision of services supporting visitation for sport, recreation and tourism.

This peer-reviewed cross-industry classification framework for describing POS was prepared by the Western Australian Department of Sport and Recreation (DSR). The development of the framework involved extensive consultation with stakeholders in both local and state government and is designed for use by professionals involved in public open space planning, design and management.

It is intended that the classification framework will:

- Encourage planning and management agencies and authorities to adopt common terminology and enable comparative assessments of open space provision and function, both locally and regionally.
- Inform high level policy and urban planning practice.
- Inform review and revision of open space elements in Liveable Neighbourhoods Guidelines (LNG).

Within this document, POS refers to urban green spaces: parklands, play areas, playing fields, bushland, greenways and other similar spaces people use for recreation, sport and social interaction.

## Background

Public open space (POS) is generally described as land set aside for the purpose of public enjoyment and protection of unique, environmental, social and cultural values for existing and future generations. Allocation of open spaces is most often determined by a local or state government authority through urban development processes. Since 1955, Western Australian planning policy and guidelines have determined how much land must be ceded for POS within new residential developments.

Under current WA Department of Planning LNG, the hierarchy of POS includes local, neighbourhood, district, and regional open space, special purpose park, playing field or community purpose site. Descriptive guidelines in LNG include relatively little discussion regarding the need to consider diversity of open space function within neighbourhood planning. In addition, the application of LNG has resulted in an imbalance in favour of smaller open spaces and those of an appropriate size to accommodate organised sport.

Current practice in many local government authorities also defines POS in hierarchical terms, with criteria most often relating to size. When purpose or function is considered, “active” is used to describe areas designed and maintained for structured, organised sport, with “passive” used to describe areas designed and managed for recreation and more informal activity. It is also recognised that categories of open space area can be nested within one another. For example, an open space categorised as district because of size, infrastructure or use, may also act as local or neighbourhood open space for nearby residents if designed appropriately.

Provision of good quality POS involves shared professional understanding of key aspects of open space allocation and design. Planning and management of POS involves professionals in urban planning and design, community development, health and fitness, engineering, landscaping and horticulture.

Research commissioned by Parks and Leisure Australia WA Region (PLA WA) and DSR in 2010 identified increasing concerns about the lack of clear and consistent terminology and descriptions that enabled comparable classification and shared understandings of POS. While many of the same terms were commonly used (particularly active or passive, local, neighbourhood, district and regional open space), there was confusion regarding how each was defined and interpreted by professionals in different disciplines. The development of cross-industry accepted terminology to describe fundamental form and function of different types of POS is a critical step in reducing confusion.

## Purpose

The primary purpose of this framework is to define terminology that can be universally used to describe POS. Agreed understanding of what constitutes different types of open space form and function is considered essential to developing well designed, community-focused open space networks.

The framework classifies open spaces where community access is encouraged and explicitly managed. While it is acknowledged that substantial recreation activities occur in other areas of publicly accessible space, the framework is not intended to apply to areas where the primary purpose or function is identified as:

- Preservation and restoration of natural features and values such as Bush Forever estate, conservation reserve, nature reserve, state forest or similar.
- Residual land or land set aside as urban deferred or for road reserve or similar purpose.
- River and coastal foreshore reserves and buffer zones.
- Where statutory responsibility lies with the Western Australian Planning Commission, Department of Environment and Conservation or other State Government body.

Further, it is not intended that the descriptions contained in this framework be interpreted as a set of prescriptive standards for POS design or for the provision of infrastructure such as car parking or community buildings. Specific guidelines for design and infrastructure provision will depend on local needs and are most appropriately articulated by the relevant local government authority (LGA) within their own suite of policies.

This open space classification framework was developed through extensive consultation within the WA Department of Planning, local government, and professional industry groups. In the first stage, a representative reference group was formed to inform and guide the development of the draft framework. A cross-discipline workshop hosted by Parks and Leisure Australia considered the framework from the varying perspectives, with feedback assisting further refinement. A draft was distributed for state-wide comment in 2011 and generated 38 submissions on behalf of 40 organisations, including state government, local government, private consultancy, peak bodies and community groups. The framework presented here is the result of an extensive review of comments, questions and recommendations contained in those responses.

## Application of the framework

This framework contains two central categories – function and catchment hierarchy:

**Function** (primary use and expected activities) identifies three primary types of open spaces:

- Recreation spaces
- Sport spaces
- Nature spaces

**Catchment hierarchy** (typical size and how far a user might travel to visit the site) includes four categories:

- Local open space
- Neighbourhood open space
- District open space
- Regional open space

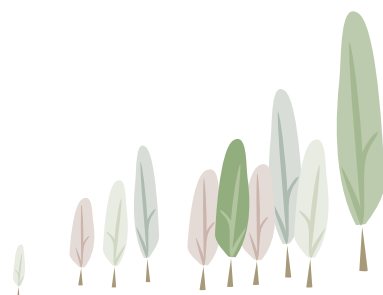
Descriptions of these different types of POS include commonly observed functions and features and are not intended to be interpreted as prescriptive planning or design standards. Schematic layouts are indicative only and are provided as simple examples of how a local, neighbourhood, district or regional open space might look. Typical size range provided within catchment descriptions is intended only as a guide, not an expected standard.

It is not assumed that descriptions of open spaces contained in this framework will match all circumstances. Categories and descriptions may need to be expanded or adapted within local policies to enable inclusion of specific sites, recognition of local characteristics or variation in application due to contextual setting, eg inner urban residential, peri-urban greenfield development or within regional cities or townships.

Table 1 describes the function of recreation, sport and nature space.

Tables 2-5 describes the catchment for local, neighbourhood, district and regional open space. Descriptors include purpose and function, access, typical size, desirable location and design components, and activity opportunities.

Figures 1-4 are indicative schematic examples of how a local, neighbourhood, district or regional open space might look.



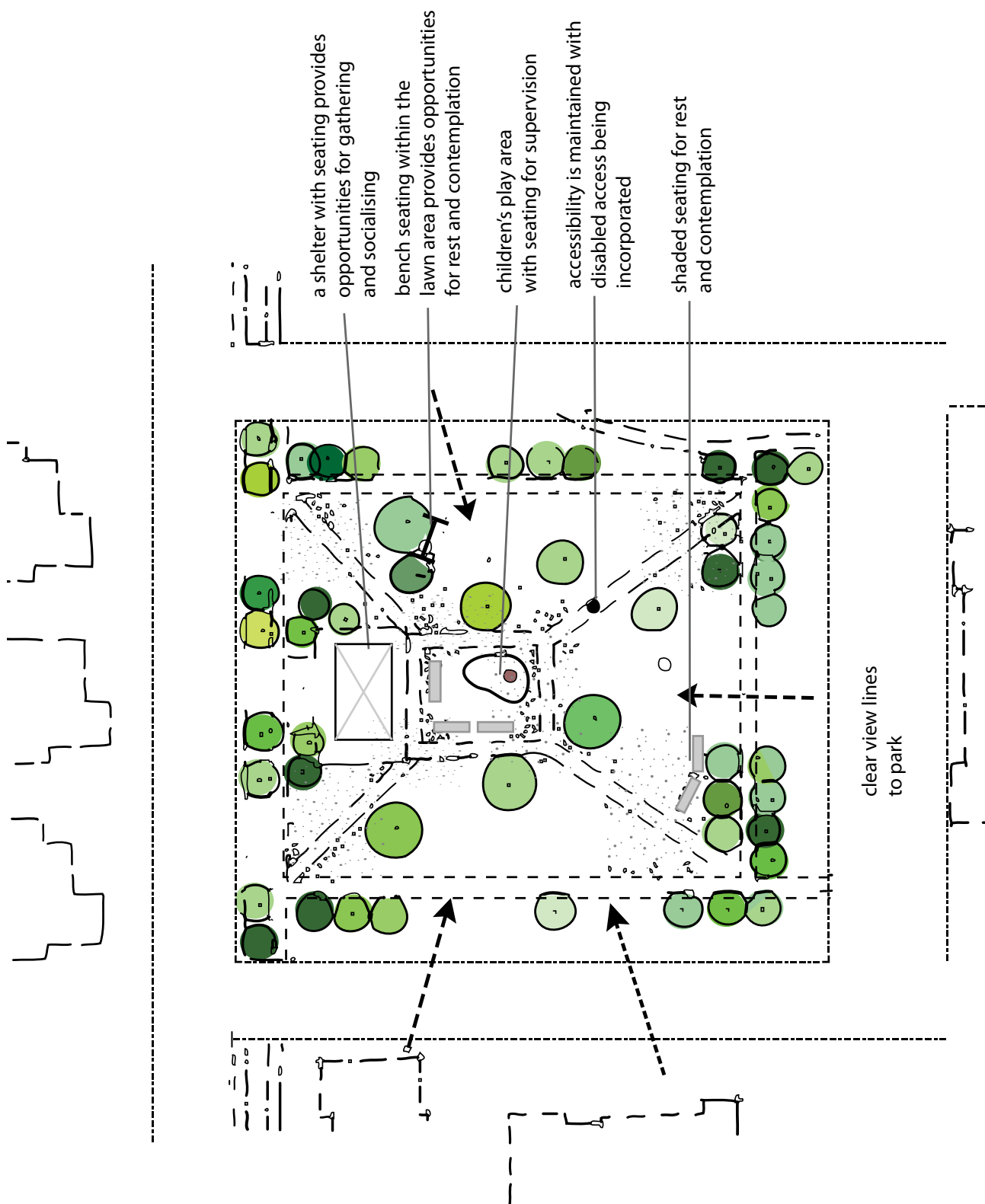
**Table 1     Open space functions**

<b>Recreation spaces</b>	
Purpose	Recreation spaces provide a setting for informal play and physical activity, relaxation and social interaction.
Description	<p>Recreation spaces enhance physical and mental health through activity that provides relaxation, amusement or stimulation.</p> <p>Recreation spaces can be accessed by all to play, socialise, exercise, celebrate or participate in other activities that provide personal satisfaction or intrinsic reward.</p> <p>Recreation spaces include gardens and open parklands, community gardens, corridor links, amenity spaces, community use facilities, civic commons or squares.</p>
<b>Sport spaces</b>	
Purpose	Sport spaces provide a setting for formal structured sporting activities.
Description	<p>Sport spaces provide a venue for formal structured sporting activities such as team competitions, physical skill development and training.</p> <p>Sport spaces are designed to accommodate playing surface, buffer zones and infrastructure requirements of specific or general sporting activity.</p> <p>Players and spectators attend with the express purpose of engaging in organised sporting activity, training or competition or watching the game.</p> <p>Most sport spaces can also be accessed by community members for informal sport and recreation.</p>
<b>Nature spaces</b>	
Purpose	Nature spaces provide a setting where people can enjoy nearby nature and protect local biodiversity and natural area values.
Description	<p>Nature spaces provide opportunity for low-impact recreational activities, such as walking, cycling, picnicking, playing, watching or exploring natural features.</p> <p>Nature spaces may include bushland, coastal areas, wetlands and riparian habitats, and geological and natural features. Sites are managed to enable recreational access while protecting local ecological and biodiversity values.</p>

**Table 2    Local open space**

Local	
Purpose and function	<p>Local open space (LOS) is usually small parklands that service the recreation needs of the immediate residential population.</p> <p>LOS is primarily used for recreation and may include small areas of nature space.</p> <p>LOS is unlikely to be used for any formal or informal sport.</p>
Access	Within 400 metres or 5 minute walk.
Typical size	0.4ha to 1ha**
Location and design	<p>LOS should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be located within a 5 minute walk from surrounding residences</li> <li>• Include accessible, safe pedestrian and cycling connections</li> <li>• Form part of an overall pedestrian and cycling network to connect key destination points</li> <li>• Support good passive surveillance</li> <li>• Be responsive to natural site features</li> <li>• Build on sense of place</li> <li>• Assist to preserve local biodiversity and natural area values.</li> </ul>
Activities	<p>LOS activities may include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Children's play, dog walking, picnics, friends and family gatherings</li> <li>• Relaxation and rest spots</li> <li>• Casual team activities</li> <li>• Walking, running or cycling.</li> </ul>
<p>** Small open spaces can provide numerous community benefits, particularly within an inner urban context.</p> <p>The inclusion of small parks (less than 0.4ha) in greenfield residential developments is not generally considered optimal unless purposeful function can be demonstrated.</p>	

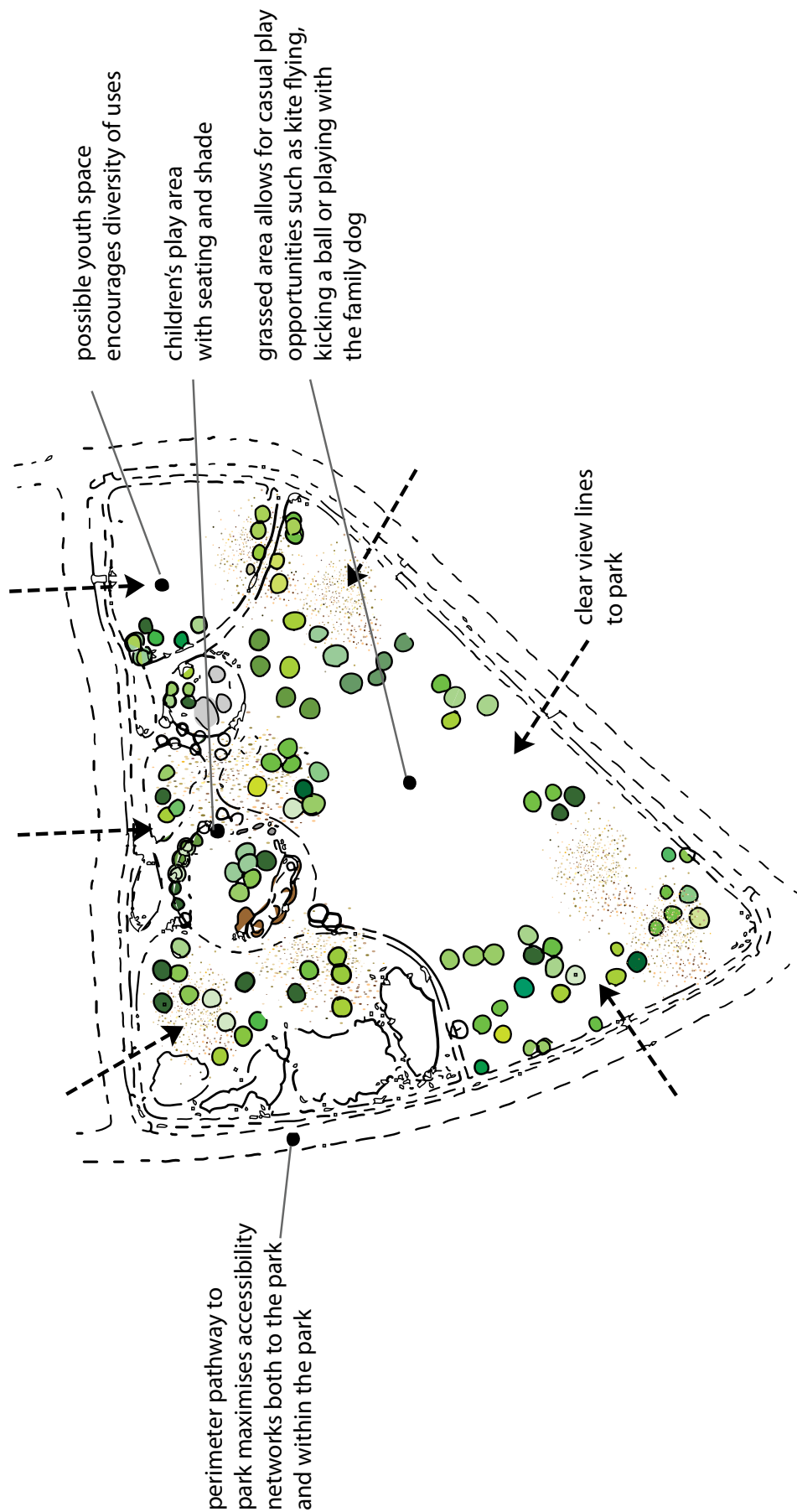
**Figure 1 Example of local open space**



**Table 3    Neighbourhood open space**

Local	
Purpose and function	<p>Neighbourhood open space (NOS) serves as the recreational and social focus of a community. Residents are attracted by the variety of features and facilities and opportunities to socialise.</p> <p>NOS can assist to engender sense of place and protect specific conservation values through retention of nature spaces.</p> <p>NOS may be used for junior sport or sports training if appropriate space is available.</p>
Access	Within 800 metres or 10 minute walk
Typical size	1ha to 5ha
Location and design	<p>NOS should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be central to surrounding neighbourhoods</li> <li>• Include accessible, safe pedestrian and cycling connections</li> <li>• Form part of an overall pedestrian and cycling network to connect key destination points</li> <li>• Support good passive surveillance</li> <li>• Be responsive to natural site features</li> <li>• Build on sense of place</li> <li>• Assist to preserve local biodiversity and natural area values.</li> </ul> <p>NOS may also:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be colocated with schools to create a community hub</li> <li>• Be large enough to enable different activities and uses to occur simultaneously.</li> </ul>
Activities	<p>NOS may include a combination of open parkland and bushland with activity spaces for casual play.</p> <p>NOS may include sport facilities, depending on ability to accommodate desirable field dimensions and necessary supporting amenity.</p>

**Figure 2 Example of neighbourhood open space**



**Table 4 District open space**

District	
Purpose and function	<p>District open space (DOS) is principally designed to provide for organised formal sport.</p> <p>DOS will very likely include substantial recreation space and some nature space. DOS design and function should consider biodiversity principles and environmental management goals.</p> <p>DOS serves several neighbourhoods with players and visitors travelling from surrounding districts.</p>
Access	<p>Within 2 kilometre or 5 minute drive.</p> <p>In regional WA, DOS may provide sporting facilities for the wider district and surrounding communities.</p>
Typical size	5ha to 15+ha
Location and design	<p>DOS should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be located central to the catchment to maximise accessibility</li> <li>• Accommodate the recommended dimensions and supporting amenity for formal sport and recreation</li> <li>• Be located on district distributor roads with good passive surveillance</li> <li>• Be serviced by public transport networks</li> <li>• Include accessible, safe pedestrian and cycling connectors.</li> </ul> <p>DOS may also:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be collocated with a school or other community facilities to create a community hub</li> <li>• Provide a significant visual break in the urban environment, particularly along major thoroughfares</li> <li>• Assist to preserve local biodiversity and natural area values.</li> </ul>
Activities	<p>DOS may:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consist of sufficient space to accommodate a variety of concurrent uses, including organised sports, children's play, picnicking, exercising the dog, social gatherings and individual activities.</li> <li>• Include a combination of bushland, open parkland for casual play and space for organised sport.</li> <li>• Accommodate multiple user groups, clubs and associations.</li> </ul>

**Figure 3 Example of district open space**



**Table 5    Regional open space**

Regional	
Purpose and function	<p>Regional open space (ROS) may accommodate important recreation and organised sport spaces as well as significant conservation and/or environmental features.</p> <p>ROS may provide substantial facilities for organised sport, play, social interaction, relaxation and enjoyment of nature.</p> <p>ROS can assist to protect biodiversity conservation and environmental values through retention of bushland, wetlands and other natural features.</p>
Access	<p>ROS serves one or more geographical or social regions and is likely to attract visitors from outside any one local government area.</p> <p>Users not living within close proximity will use either private vehicles or public transport systems.</p>
Typical size	<p>Size is variable and dependant on function.</p> <p>When sporting space is identified as a necessary regional function, allocations for playing fields and sports facilities should be 20+ha in area.</p>
Location and design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ROS is allocated outside the structure planning process by the WA Planning Commission in consultation with local government.</li> <li>• Location of ROS is usually determined by resource availability and opportunities to utilise and/or protect the space.</li> <li>• ROS should be well—connected to major road and public transport networks.</li> <li>• Sport spaces allocated within ROS must have the capacity to accommodate required field dimensions for both junior and adult sporting competition and appropriate supporting amenity.</li> <li>• ROS should accommodate biodiversity principles and environmental management goals where possible.</li> </ul>
Activities	<p>ROS should be large enough to accommodate various concurrent uses, including organised sports, children's play, picnicking, bush walking, and protection of natural features.</p>

## References

Carter, M.E. (2010). Public open space planning in Western Australia: Key issues relating to policy, design and management. Perth, WA: Parks and Leisure Australia (WA Region).

Curtis, B. (2010). Industry accepted terminology for open space. Perth, WA: Government of Western Australia, Department of Sport and Recreation.



