



Parks Categories Framework

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Notes:

- This is an updated version of the original Parks Categories and Levels of Service Framework 2011
- For an updated guideline to the development and use of Levels of Service, please refer to IPWEA Parks Practice Note 10.3
<http://www.ipwea.org/publications/bookshop>



1.0 Introduction

The parks categories framework has been developed by the New Zealand Recreation Association (NZRA) in consultation with the New Zealand parks sector, to provide a New Zealand relevant industry guideline for consistent application across the parks and open spaces sector.

Parks categories provide the first level of defining the level of service in relation to the park's purpose and character. This helps define how it will be developed, what assets are provided and the maintenance standard.

The parks categories framework was first established in 2011 and was reviewed in 2017. The review established that there is widespread adoption and use of the NZRA parks categories adopted in 2011, although many organisations are applying some variation to naming and categories used. There was no strong or consistent view that the categories should be changed. It was also considered that any changes at this stage would disadvantage organisations that have already categorised their parks to suit the NZRA categories.

The review identified that it would be desirable to create a framework approach that provided for the use of different category names, but within a consistent framework, to cater for local flexibility that organisations may wish to apply.

The use of sub-categories was also considered, with the outcome that a clearer definition and guidance in the use of sub-categories was required.

1.1 Background

Due to the diverse range of parks and open spaces provided, their planning and management has for many years involved categorisation of parks into groups based on their purpose, catchment or standard of maintenance. The NZRA Parks Categories framework developed in 2011 was the first industry recognised framework that applied consistent terminology to categories. However, it has become apparent that while there is widespread adoption of the categories, organisations were often still applying some modification of the category names in their use and application.

While there is much common ground, there have been a number of different interpretations of the categories. Even within organisations, different categories can be used for different purposes, e.g. planning, asset management and operations sections may all use different terminology for parks categories to organise their work.

As a first step, it is essential that within an organisation, the same parks categories are used across all sections of the organisation – e.g. planners, asset management, sports and recreation and operations.

The next step is the consistent use of a park category system across the industry. As no parks category system will perfectly cover the very wide range of park types provided, a flexible yet consistent approach needs to be applied to allocating park land to an industry standard category framework.

1.2 Reserves Act 1977

The Reserves Act 1977 provides the legal classification system for New Zealand parks and reserves. The system establishes high level classifications and was designed to cover all reserves types across the country. This system has been found to have limited application and value for the planning and management of urban parks managed by local authorities. The intent of the NZRA parks categories framework is to establish an agreed set of lower level parks categories and associated definitions, which can be used consistently across the industry.

A review of the Reserves Act 1977 and its classification system incorporating the needs of urban parks management would be the ideal outcome. However, there are not currently sufficient drivers for a substantive review of the Act to occur in the foreseeable future.

It is therefore envisaged that the NZRA parks categories project will work alongside the Reserves Act 1977 in the management of N.Z. parks. Reserves Act 1977 classifications appropriate to the park category will continue to be applied, to provide legal protection and for the development and implementation of management plans.

2.0 Categories Framework

The categories provide a baseline framework for individual organisations to utilise as appropriate to their circumstances.

In broad terms, the categories selected are based on the following factors:

- i) Character (what the park looks like)
- ii) Purpose (what the park is used for)
- iii) Level of service (standard of provision, development and maintenance)

The categories are designed so that organisations will be able to allocate all their parks and open spaces (in all but exceptional circumstances) to one or more of the categories.

When applying the parks category framework, it is recognised that most parks have a range of uses and values. Also, no parks category system will perfectly cover every park type. Therefore, a flexible yet consistent approach needs to be applied to allocating park land to the categories. To determine the appropriate category for each park, organisations must determine the **primary** purpose of that park.

Not every organisation will have a park in every category. For example, not all organisations will have parks that meet the criteria of Outdoor Adventure Parks or Public Gardens.

Although the objective of the parks categories framework is to define categories that will accommodate all parks, some organisations may have one or more parks that simply do not fit. These organisations may need to create an additional category that allows for these parks special characteristics, purpose or level of service where this is not provided for in the framework. It is recommended that in general, existing categories are used and the creation of additional categories is only used in exceptional circumstances.

Wherever possible it is recommended that the primary category name be used to provide the best level of consistency possible across the industry. This has benefits both from a management perspective and the use of other NZRA industry tools such as Yardstick benchmarking and the Open Space Maintenance Specification.

Consistent use of category names also has benefits for members of the community using our parks or consultation processes. It will lead to a higher level of understanding regarding what to expect from different categories of parks regardless of the Council area.

3.0 Park Categories

3.1 Framework

Category	Description/Primary Purpose	Alternative Names
Sports and Recreation	Parks (often quite large areas) set aside and developed for organised sport and recreation activities, recreation facilities and buildings, often multiple use.	• Active • Sports
Neighbourhood	Parks developed and used for informal recreation and sporting activities, play and family based activities, and social and community activities.	• Local • Social Recreation • Community
Public Gardens	Parks and gardens developed to a very high horticultural standard with collections of plants and landscaping for relaxation, contemplation, appreciation, education, events, functions and amenity/intrinsic value.	• Botanic Gardens • Horticultural • Premier
Nature	Parks that offer the experience and/or protection of the natural environment, containing native bush, coastal margins, forestry, farm parks, wetlands, riparian areas and water bodies.	• Conservation • Bushland • Forest • Protected • Environmental
Cultural Heritage	Parks that protect the built cultural and historical environment, and/or provide for heritage conservation, education, commemoration, mourning and remembrance.	• Cemeteries • Cultural • Heritage
Outdoor Adventure	Parks developed and used for recreation and sporting activities and associated built facilities that require a large scale, forested, rural or peri-urban environment.	• Regional • Forest • Farm • All Terrain
Civic	Areas of open space often provided within or adjacent to central business districts, and developed to provide a space for social gatherings, meeting places, relaxation and enjoyment	• Plaza • Community Hub • Town Squares • Streetscape
Recreation and Ecological Linkages	Areas of open space that are often linear in nature, that provide pedestrian and cycle linkages, wildlife corridors and access to water margins. May provide for environmental protection, and access to waterways.	• Linear • Walkways • Corridor • Green Corridors • Environmental Corridors • Esplanade • Linkage

3.2 Category Descriptions

3.2.1 Sports and Recreation

Primary Purpose	Alternate Names	Typical Characteristics
Organised/competition sport and recreation activity, recreation facilities and buildings, often multiple use	- Active - Sports	- Sport facilities, e.g. grass fields, hard courts, artificial surfaces - Buildings, e.g. toilets, changing rooms, clubrooms, community centres, community activities - Recreation facilities, e.g. Playgrounds, skate parks, half courts, picnic areas, bike tracks etc - Seating - Landscaping - Usually large size - Leased sites could be small (e.g. the size of a single club)

Description

A Sports and Recreation Park is designed and used for organised or competition sport and recreation, and is often multi-use, providing for a range of community activities and facilities.

It is likely to have formally maintained sports turf for a mixture of winter and/or summer sport. The sports turf areas are maintained to an appropriate standard for the sports code use. It may accommodate hard court and built recreation facilities. The determining factor is the provision of bookable sports play facilities, which are the primary purpose of the park.

Toilets, changing facilities and car parking are likely to be available and some may have resident club facilities.

Some parks may have recreation facilities such as playgrounds, and other facilities serving a wider neighbourhood and community function, creating a multi-function park with a wide range of activities occurring. Some parks may be entirely leased for sports or recreation activity.



3.2.2 Neighbourhood

Primary Purpose	Alternate Names	Typical Characteristics
Informal recreation and sporting activities, play and family based activities, and social and community activities	- Social Recreation - Community	- Playgrounds - Recreation facilities, e.g. skate parks, half courts, bike tracks and other informal recreation activities - Picnic facilities e.g. barbeques/tables/shelters - Usually small areas (up to 2-5 ha) located near or within residential areas - Dog exercise areas and dog parks - May have sports field for junior or informal use - May have buildings, e.g. toilets, community centres/halls, other community service buildings

Description

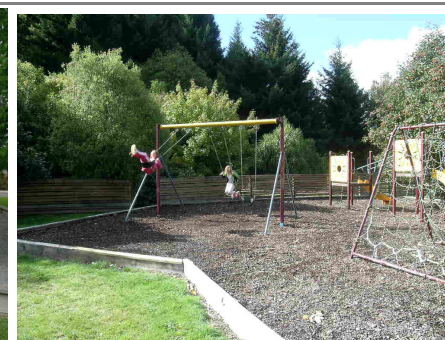
A developed urban park designed for use predominantly by the local residential community, although the catchment may be wider. Generally smaller in size, ranging from 1,000m² up to 2 hectares. The average useful size is considered to be from 3,000 to 5,000m².

The Neighbourhood Park should be easily accessible, ideally from more than one road frontage. It will be well maintained and free draining with flat or gently undulating grassed areas for play. The park should be safe and provide an attractive welcoming ambience to the immediate local community (within a ten minute walking distance or 500 metre radius of urban residential properties).

Neighbourhood Parks may provide an open grass area suitable for small scale ball play, children's play equipment, youth recreation facilities e.g. basketball half courts, seating, amenity lighting, paths and attractive amenity planting.

Some may contain playing fields but are distinguished from the sports and recreation category by being for casual use and not generally booked for regular sports code use.

Some sites may contain buildings used for local community and recreation functions.



3.2.3 Public Gardens

Primary Purpose	Alternate Names	Typical Characteristics
High quality plant collections and landscaping provided for relaxation, contemplation, appreciation, education, events, functions and their amenity/intrinsic value	▪ Botanic Gardens ▪ Horticultural ▪ Premier	▪ Horticultural / botanical display plantings ▪ Display houses ▪ High quality landscaping ▪ Interpretation, e.g. plant names, historic or horticultural information, visitor centres, education programmes ▪ May be used as a venue for events and functions e.g. weddings, light displays

Description

Public Gardens include parks that are of significance to the city/district with an emphasis on high quality horticultural displays.

The primary focus for Public Gardens is to create a place of beauty and tranquillity through high quality horticultural design and maintenance and other features as appropriate to the park's character. They often also contain historic heritage values.

Public Gardens include, but are not limited to Botanic gardens.

They will generally exhibit one or more of the following values and attributes:

- Peace & tranquillity
- Horticultural excellence and diversity
- Tourist destination
- Particular unique feature or character
- Historic, artistic or cultural values
- Horticultural and/or environmental education

Public Gardens will be developed and maintained to the highest standard. They may also have a "Friends" organisation which supports the Public Gardens, including fundraising for capital development and running volunteer programmes.



3.2.4 Nature

Primary Purpose	Alternate Names	Typical Characteristics
Experience and/or protection of the natural environment	- Conservation - Bushland - Forest - Protected - Environmental	- Native bush, coastal margins, forestry, farm parks, wetlands, riparian areas and water bodies. - Developments to provide basic facilities for walking, biking, horse riding, camping, picnicking and visitor information

Description

The primary purpose of Nature Parks is to provide opportunities for people to experience nature. The definition of nature and natural is widely defined to include: native bush areas, wetlands, coastal and lake margins, forestry, farm parks, esplanade and restoration areas or other natural landscapes are considered Nature Parks.

Development will generally be limited to low impact activities such as walking and bike tracks. Higher use sites may include ancillary visitor facilities such as car parking, signage and toilets, camping facilities and visitor information centres.

Nature parks may exhibit one or more of the following values and attributes:

- Large scale sites
- Low impact recreation activity
- Intact or relatively intact natural ecosystems
- Unique or threatened NZ native flora and fauna
- Park land adjoining the coast
- Natural wetland areas
- Water bodies such as lakes/ponds, streams and/or riparian features
- Outstanding natural landscape or geological features
- Access to the coast and other water ways



3.2.5 Cultural Heritage

Primary Purpose	Alternate Names	Typical Characteristics
Protection of built cultural environment to provide for heritage conservation, education, commemoration, mourning and remembrance	▪ Cemeteries ▪ Cultural ▪ Heritage ▪ Historic	▪ Cultural heritage features e.g. pa sites ▪ Historic sites, buildings or structures ▪ Memorial sites ▪ Cemeteries

Description

The primary purpose of Cultural Heritage Parks is to protect and experience our heritage, and provide for interment and remembrance.

Generally a low level of development is envisaged for Cultural Heritage Parks with the objective being to protect the current values. Higher use sites may require ancillary visitor facilities such as car parking, signage and toilets. Restoration and enhancement work may be undertaken to recreate lost values and features.

Cemeteries are provided to provide a location for the interments and remembrance. The primary objective is to create a respectful environment that is attractive, restful and suitable for reflection and grieving. Cemeteries will require a high level of development to meet their purpose and visitor needs. They are included within the park network to reflect the wide range of uses and values cemeteries provide.

They will generally exhibit one or more of the following values and attributes:

- Historic sites
- Historic buildings and structures
- Monuments and memorials
- Other sites of cultural or heritage significance
- Cemeteries including both open and closed



3.2.6 Outdoor Adventure

Primary Purpose	Alternate Names	Typical Characteristics
Recreation and sporting activities and associated built facilities that require a large scale, forested, rural or peri-urban environment.	- Regional - Forest - Farm - All Terrain	- Rural or peri-urban setting - Large scale - Multiple range of activities - Nature/environment based recreation activities

Description

Outdoor Adventure Parks enable visitors to experience a variety of recreation activities in a wide range of open space environments.

Outdoor Adventure Parks will generally be large sites, usually located on the outskirts of the urban areas. The character and management of the parks varies widely from exotic forestry, farm parks, native bush, coastal and river areas. The recreation activities include those that require the space and separation from urban locations or require particular natural features. Examples include mountain biking, equestrian, rock climbing, wind-sports, motorised recreation, shooting ranges, dirt jump parks, camping, picnicking, hunting, canoeing/kayaking etc.

The levels of service for Outdoor Adventure Parks can vary widely depending on the type of park and level of use. Also, the level of service may vary from one area of the park to another, E.g. entry points may be developed to a high standard with extensive facilities and more remote areas may have minimal services. Internal roading networks may be required in large parks with multiple use.

Outdoor adventure parks are generally more developed than Nature parks, and have more opportunity for lease areas for commercial recreation. The main focus of Outdoor Adventure parks is the recreation activity which uses the park as a natural setting. The main focus of Nature parks by contrast is experience and protection of the environment.



3.2.7 Civic Space

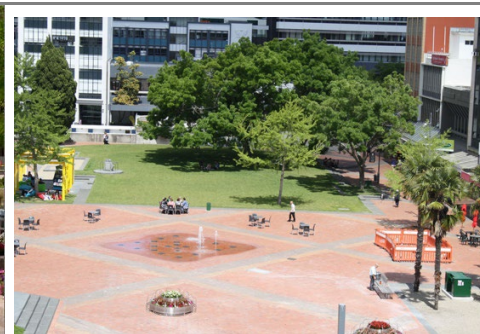
Primary Purpose	Alternate Names	Typical Characteristics
Areas of open space often provided within or adjacent to central business districts, and developed to provide a space for social gatherings, meeting places, relaxation and enjoyment	- Plaza - Community Hub - Town Squares - Streetscape	- Business/retail area location - Hard paving - Soft landscaping - Seating areas - High standard of presentation and maintenance - Associated with council service buildings such as town hall, library, swimming pool

Description

Open space provided within or immediately adjacent to central business districts or other retail/business areas, designed to provide a space for social gatherings, meetings, rest and relaxation, lunch breaks, etc. They may also provide for large public gatherings, events and entertainment.

Civic Spaces provide landscape, amenity enhancement and visual open space relief. They may contain grass, trees, gardens, public art, water features, furniture, paved areas, lighting and heritage features such as memorials, clocks etc. These areas are usually pedestrianised although some may be shared with vehicles.

Civic space may also be used to categorise other streetscape areas.



3.2.8 Recreation and Ecological Linkages

Primary Purpose	Alternate Names	Typical Characteristics
Open space, linkages and corridors, often associated with waterways. Often cater for walking and cycling activities and active transport linkages. May provide for environmental protection, and access to waterways.	▪ Linear ▪ Walkways ▪ Corridor ▪ Green Corridors ▪ Environmental Corridors ▪ Esplanade ▪ Linkage	▪ Often, but not always linear in nature. ▪ May be alongside waterways such as rivers/streams, lakes, coast or drainage infrastructure, or utilise old rail corridors. ▪ Variable size and often difficult topography. ▪ Grass/tree planting or natural vegetation ▪ Walking and cycling paths and tracks ▪ Often connect or provide access to other parks or waterways. ▪ Generally a low level of development other than formed paths and trails ▪ Boat ramps and associated facilities

Description

Recreation and Ecological Linkages covers a wide range of purposes, from developed areas with mown grass and trees through to undeveloped green space. They provide an important role in meeting sustainability objectives through protection and enhancement of biodiversity, ecological linkages through the urban environment, urban form and landscape values and opportunities for walking and cycle linkages.

Recreation and Ecological Linkages provide a wide range of functions, from largely unused or inaccessible areas through to areas used actively for picnics, walking, biking and other recreation. They often provide for walkway/transport linkages from one neighbourhood to another or to link parks together. They may be based on geographic features within the urban environment, where buildings are not possible e.g. stream gullies, drainage areas or steep hillsides.

Generally Recreation and Ecological Linkages will have a low level of development, except where usage and demand warrants it. This may include tracks, park furniture and signage. Vehicle access and parking is often limited to nodes or entry points.



4.0 Using the Categories Framework

4.1 Allocating parks to a category

Questions that should be asked when deciding on which parks categories from the NZRA framework are required for your organisation, if they are to be used effectively by all parks disciplines, include their usefulness for:

- Budgeting and reporting expenditure
- Defining asset hierarchies
- Setting staff structures
- Setting how contracts are packaged
- Packaging of parks for management plans
- Driving capital development programs
- Defining land to acquire or dispose of

Once the parks categories have been finalised, the next step is to try and place each park into one of the categories.

When looking at parks with multiple uses, try and focus on the principle activity/characteristic associated with a park. For example, a sports park with some natural area is probably best defined as a sports park. However, in some instances, it may be necessary to divide a single park into two or more parks categories if their use and character is quite different, and at a scale that warrants splitting it up for practical reasons.

Using a sports park as an example, if the natural area adjacent to the sportsfields is more than just a few 1000m², and has several trails and is popular with the community, it is probably worth considering splitting the site into two parks categories – sports and natural, for example.

It is important to be able to identify the size of each of these “split” areas and ensure the categorisation is applied consistently across the organisation. With the advent of GIS mapping tools, it is now relatively easy to split land areas or parcels into different park categories and display this graphically using aerial photography.

Recreation and Ecological Linkages, which are often associated with waterways and are longer than wide, will often have “nodes” at either end, or along them. These “nodes” can be in a different park category. For example, a sports park might be at one end, and a Recreation and Ecological Linkage park leads to a Neighbourhood park at the other end. All three have distinctly different activities, characteristics, and asset provision.

It is critical that application of the parks categories is used consistently across the organisation, so that all staff at all levels know what is being referred to. This ensures they are referred to consistently in strategies, asset management plans and operational programs etc.

To help interpret (and reinforce) to the community what each park is, and their principle/intended use, parks signs can also reflect the parks category, perhaps as a sub heading. Eventually the whole community, and not just the organisation, will be speaking the same language, setting the scene for clearer dialogue in the future and helping to define (and curb) expectations about what is provided on a particular park over another.

4.2 Use of sub-categories

In addition to allocating each park to a category, further sub-categorisation is required based on the level of utilisation. The higher the utilisation, the higher the level of quality, reflected through asset provision and maintenance standards.

This additional level of classification is needed to fully define the various level of service standards that are applied across the parks network.

Catchments are often used to define this level of utilisation, but the relationship between catchment, utilisation and desired quality standard is often not consistent.

A **Management Standard**, based on the level of utilisation will provide much greater flexibility, rather than being tied to where parks users come from or how far they might travel – which varies widely for each park category.

However, quality is highly subjective and open to interpretation. It is therefore important that we attempt to define and document the Management Standard as well as we possibly can.

Using three Management Standards should cover most situations, without being overly complex. However, more or less Management Standards may be used as required, depending on an organisations parks network characteristics, and community expectations. For example, there are likely to be only high quality (and perhaps medium quality) parks in the Civic parks category, and perhaps only medium quality and low quality for Recreation and Ecological Linkages.

While provision and development Management Standards might vary by park category, Management Standards for operations and maintenance can usually be applied consistently across several or all park categories. For example, grass mown on the non-sportsfield surrounds of a Management Standard 2 (medium) sports park is likely to be to the same standard as grass mown on a Management Standard 2 (medium) Neighbourhood park, Recreation and Ecological Linkages, and Nature park (if present).

Generally, up to three Management Standards are appropriate for most operational and maintenance activities. However, grass mowing is likely to need four or five quality standards to cater for the wide variation between roadside slashing standards and mowing standards in an organisation's premier park(s).

Using descriptive labels such as high, medium and low is subjective (and emotive). It is therefore worth considering using more neutral terminology such as Management Standard 1, 2 or 3 as an example, as illustrated below in table 1.1.

Name	Level of Use	Description
Management Standard 1	High	This standard has the highest level of asset provision, using quality materials and bespoke designs. Maintenance is undertaken to the highest affordable standards, with quick response times and proactive programed operations
Management Standard 2	Medium	This standard has a moderate level of asset provision, using robust materials and simple designs. Maintenance is undertaken to good standards, with standard response times and programed operations.
Management Standard 3	Low	This standard has the lowest level of asset provision, using robust materials and simple designs. Maintenance is undertaken to the lowest acceptable standard, with longer response times and fewer programed operations.

Table 1.1 Management standards example

The following are two examples, for Sports parks and Neighbourhood parks.

Park Category	Management Standard	Description
Sports & Recreation Park	Management Standard 1	A park for use by highest/premier grades of competition sport or high levels of use. A large range of quality assets provided, and maintained to a high standard.
	Management Standard 2	A park for use by standard grades of competition sport or medium levels of use. A range of quality assets provided, and maintained to a medium standard.
	Management Standard 3	Caters for lower grades of sport or low levels of utilisation. Few assets provided, and maintained at a standard for junior and lower club competition play.
Neighbourhood Park	Management Standard 1	A high use/profile park which often people will take visitors to, or will travel quite some distance to use. A large range and number of high quality (often custom designed) assets provided, and maintained to the highest standard.
	Management Standard 2	A larger park that people will often travel several kilometres to use. A good range and number of quality assets provided, and maintained at a high standard.
	Management Standard 3	A local park located in a neighbourhood, designed to be used by local residents, often within walking distance of their home. Few basic quality assets provided, and maintained to a basic standard

Table 1.2 – Example of management standard descriptor

A matrix displaying parks categories and quality standards could look like the following:

Management Standard	Sports Park	Public Garden	Neighbourhood Park	Recreation and Ecological Linkage	Civic Park
1 - High	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓
2 - Medium	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓
3 - Basic	✓	✗	✓	✓	✗

Table 1.3 – Example of application of management standard

This is an example only, and the above matrix would likely change, from organisation to organisation, depending on their parks network, budget and community.

A distinct hierarchy of management standards will help manage community expectations, communication and consultation regarding levels of service. When a member of the community is on a Management Standard 3 park, they are not expecting the same level of servicing as a Management Standard 1 park.

Using a tiered Management standard approach (as opposed to the same standard everywhere) will help determine affordability, and better meet community expectation.

The highest standard of parks will usually be expensive to operate and maintain. To afford this, a second tier of parks will have a lower, moderate level of service applied. A third tier of parks, probably the largest in area, will have yet lower standards to help make the best parks affordable.

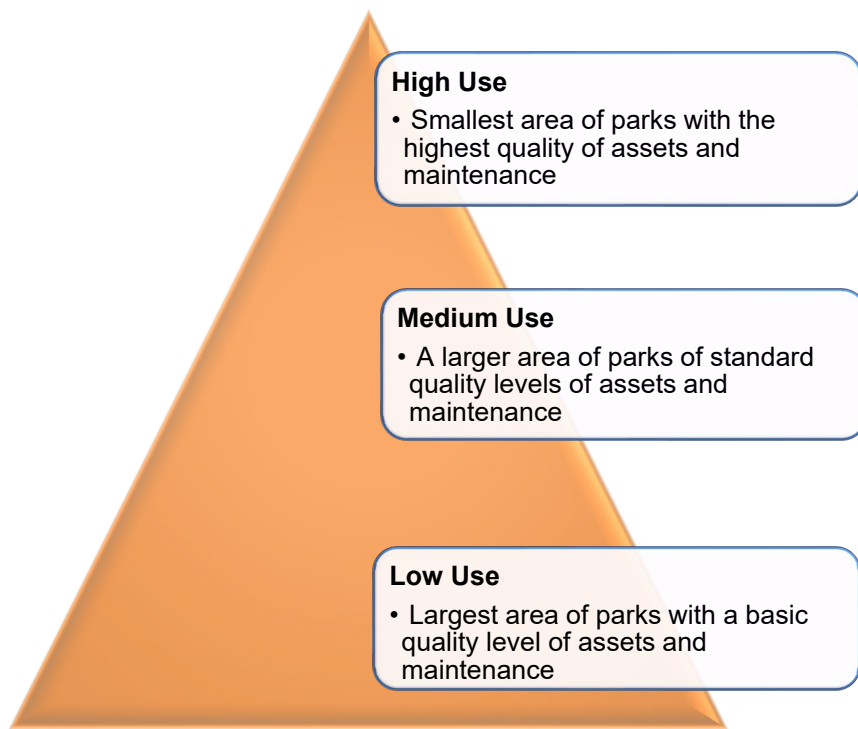


Figure 1.4 Usage/management standard hierarchy

