BRISTOL, UNITED KINGDOM

Case Study City Portrait;
part of a GREEN SURGE study on urban green infrastructure planning and governance in 20 European cities

In cooperation with:

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INTRODUCTION

This case study portrait is part of a series of 20 case studies on urban green infrastructure planning and governance in European cities, undertaken in the course of the GREEN SURGE project. GREEN SURGE is a trans-national research project funded through the European Union’s 7th Framework Programme. GREEN SURGE is an acronym for “Green Infrastructure and Urban Biodiversity for Sustainable Urban Development and the Green Economy”. The project is identifying, developing and testing ways of connecting green spaces, biodiversity, people and the green economy, in order to meet the major urban challenges related to, e.g., climate change adaptation, demographic changes, human health and well-being.

Each portraits has the following content:

- **INTRODUCTION** – which contains location and green structure maps as well as basic information on the city-region (core city and larger urban zone).
- **URBAN AND REGIONAL PLANNING CHARACTERISTICS** – which describes the main characteristics of the planning system including instruments for the protection and enhancement of green space and objectives, achievements and challenges in urban green space planning
- **EXPERIENCES WITH INNOVATIVE GOVERNANCE PRACTICES** – which outlines how, in the views of selected actors, ‘traditional’ government-driven steering of green space planning and management on the one hand, and emerging forms of governance with a greater role for non-government actors on the other, play out in different cities.
- **URBAN GREEN INFRASTRUCTURE (UGI) THEMES AND STRATEGIES** – which considers the main themes about planning and how this relates to the concept of UGI as well as policy concepts. Furthermore, implementation and evaluation of planning instruments are discussed
- **URBAN GREEN SPACES: LINKAGES BETWEEN BIODIVERSITY AND CULTURE** – which is about the linkages between cultural diversity and biological diversity and how these impact on urban green spaces and urban green structures. Urban biocultural diversity is a recent concept emphasizing the links between biological diversity and cultural diversity. Research and policy directed at biocultural diversity can focus on the roles of ethnic or other groups, the role of a great range of cultural practices (which may or may not be connected to certain groups), and to physical objects or species bearing a relationship with specific cultural-historical practices.
- **CONCLUSION** to wrap up the main findings

A report with all case studies and more detailed background information can be found on the project’s website http://greensurge.eu.
1) INTRODUCTION: Facts and Figures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Core city</th>
<th>Bristol</th>
<th>Biogeographic region</th>
<th>Atlantic</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Region</td>
<td>West of England</td>
<td>Planning family</td>
<td>British/Land use Management</td>
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<tr>
<td>Area</td>
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<tr>
<td>Core city</td>
<td>11 153 ha</td>
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<td>Larger urban zone</td>
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<td>Core city</td>
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<td>Larger urban zone</td>
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<tr>
<td>Average annual population change rate (1991-2012; Core city)</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>Public recreational green space per capita (2006, Core city; m² per inhabitants)</td>
<td>27.3</td>
</tr>
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Bristol is situated within the West of England sub-region and is the largest city within the wider South West region. It is a popular area to live as evidenced by a population increase of 9.7% between 2001 and 2011, which is above the regional and national average. Bristol developed into a regional centre during the pre-industrial and early industrial era because of its city centre harbour built on the tidal river Avon that was cleverly “locked” against the tides to keep ships afloat. Although trading declined in the 19th century, the city developed into a financial service centre given its mercantile tradition. In recent history, economic development has centred on the establishment of creative industries and the re-development of the docks from the 1970s, attracting new investment from banks.

Bristol has the ambition to become the leading European city for “innovative industry, enterprise, culture, environmental quality, lifestyle and urban design” (Bristol City Council, 2011, p. 16). It is also committed to improving quality of life by regenerating neighbourhoods, improving the public transport network, reducing dependency on car use, developing a green economy, maintaining open spaces and linking green spaces, and developing diverse and innovative new housing meeting the needs of a wide range of people. This has significantly contributed to the city winning the European Green Capital 2015 award.
2) URBAN AND REGIONAL PLANNING CHARACTERISTICS

General description of the planning system

In England, central government imposes a statutory duty on local authorities to address spatial planning as a means of managing and allocating sites for new development and other use of land. Each local authority is now required to produce a Local Plan which sets out a policy framework for spatial planning at the local level. The key documents within this are the Core Strategy, which sets out the strategic goals, direction and objectives of spatial planning, and the Site Allocations and Development Management Policies DPD, which defines more detailed planning policies, development sites, land uses and the setting for development. The Plan must conform to national government advice in the National Planning Policy Framework (2012) and associated statutory instruments. The legislation requires that procedures must be strictly followed in the preparation of a local plan, including the need to make an objective assessment of the key issues within the local authority and to involve a range of non-governmental actors.

In May 2010 the new government abolished the Regional Spatial Strategies. These documents were considered to be bureaucratic and undemocratic as representatives of regional agencies presided over their production and they were not elected by the general public. As such, regional planning authorities have been replaced with Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) including local authority officials and business representatives, which prepare a regional Strategic Economic Plan to help achieve targets around economic growth and employment.

The Localism Act 2011 heralded a change in focus for central government policy, with a reduced level of central government regulations being imposed upon local authorities and with a greater focus upon the ability of local government to respond to local needs and requirements. It also introduced a number of new instruments to empower communities, including their direct participation in spatial planning. In this regard, the Localism Act introduced the concept of neighbourhood planning, which allows communities to prepare Neighbourhood Development Plans.

Instruments for the protection and enhancement of urban green space

The Bristol Local Plan outlines the development strategy for the city and includes policies on the protection and enhancement of green space for the plan period (2011-2026). The Core Strategy policy on green infrastructure highlights the commitment of Bristol City Council to maintain, protect and enhance the strategic green infrastructure network and maps this network of open spaces, waterways and other green spaces for the first time. The Site Allocations and Development Management Policies DPD includes criteria and guidance for the provision of different types of green space in new developments, including green infrastructure policies.

The Bristol Parks and Green Space Strategy is part of the evidence base for the Development Plan Documents which make up the plan and which serve to improve the provision of accessible green spaces of sufficient quality and variety to make it available to all inhabitants of the city over a 20-year period. To this end, the strategy includes standards to evaluate existing types of green spaces as well as policy recommendations to improve the green space provision, in the shape of a delivery plan.

The Bristol Biodiversity Partnership draws up 5-year Biodiversity Action Plans to identify priority habitats, indicators and action plans for the conservation of specific species and habitats within the city. To be designated as a Site of Nature Conservation Interest, an area needs to meet specific criteria that are agreed together with a number of environmental organisations. Protected sites and designations, to which more stringent protection policies apply, are referenced in the Local Plan. Given the continuous decline of biodiversity, the UK Government has recently...
introduced the Biodiversity 2020 Strategy, which outlines actions at the scale of ecosystems as opposed to individual sites or species. This has reduced emphasis on the detailed targets in the Local Biodiversity Action Plans. The West of England Nature Partnership has been set up to improve strategic co-operation between local authorities and other relevant stakeholders at the regional level around management of green spaces and promoting a green economy. This partnership will assist with the legal duty to co-operate between Bristol City Council and neighbouring authorities in preparation of the Local Plan.

### Objectives, achievements and challenges in urban green space planning

The key objective of green space planning in Bristol is to provide different types of accessible green space, e.g. informal, formal, natural and active green space, to all local people. To better understand the requirements of local people, the Council embraces local initiatives as well as community involvement in green space planning and management. It also strives to ensure the process is as inclusive as possible to promote equity in provision, wherever practicably possible.

The Bristol Parks and Green Space Strategy plays an important role in highlighting these ambitions. It also attempts to provide the standards and policies to improve the current situation based upon an evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses in current provision. The Strategy incorporates a variety of programmes and initiatives to involve other actors in green space planning. Bristol’s ambitious plans to improve the standard of green spaces and to shape and deliver sustainable communities have helped Bristol to earn the European Green Capital 2015 award.

The need to build sufficient new houses to accommodate a predicted 26% increase in population in the city between 2000 and 2026, presents the challenge of delivering associated high quality green space in parallel. Increasing pressure upon the public purse will likely push the Council to focus upon its key challenges and core services, which may be to the detriment of investment in green infrastructure and associated community action. New mechanisms therefore need to be found to deliver new and improved green spaces and also to maintain them as well as ways to secure associated community involvement.

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**Bristol’s major challenges** (from left to right): Protecting and enhancing green space when there is a need to build 30,600 new homes till 2026 (photo: CC BY-NC-SA 2.0, Flickr.com, Joe Dunckley, 2006). -- Involving a representative sample of the community in planning decisions (photo: Paul Bradburn, 2012).
Bristol’s major achievements (from left to right): Bristol wins the European Green Capital 2015 award (photo: image courtesy of europeangreencapital.eu). -- Urban green solution by City Design Group involving non-governmental actors (photo: City Design Group).
3) EXPERIENCES WITH INNOVATIVE GOVERNANCE PRACTICES

Government ideas and practices regarding participation
As a UK local authority, Bristol has a duty to consult with non-governmental stakeholders in the preparation of strategies and plans. Opportunities for consultation are offered at various stages of plan development. The Council uses a variety of instruments to gain insights into the views of local people: stakeholder events, public meetings, questionnaires and Neighbourhood Forums.

It is current central government policy to increase influence of local people on planning decisions. The Neighbourhood Planning approach allows local people to draw up Neighbourhood Plans and accept planning applications in line with their views of what the community should look like. Bristol currently has five formal Neighbourhood Planning Areas. Other policies associated with this act include a duty placed upon developers to consult with the community before submitting planning applications for certain developments and the local authority being invested with the power to impose a community infrastructure levy on new developments.

This national trend towards increasing spatial planning decision-making powers of communities fits in with existing local government practice to take into account the views of non-governmental actors in designing the urban landscape. This is done to gain ideas on how best to provide multifunctional green space that caters the needs of a variety of user groups. Although some powers have been granted to non-governmental actors, they are unable to engage in completely independent decision-making. In order for development to be in line with central government policies, the local authority retains a moderating influence.

Local initiatives
There are a large number of local initiatives involving all types of non-governmental actors in green space planning, governance and maintenance. The highest level of involvement is probably through Friends of Parks and allotment groups, allowing local people to contribute to green space decision-making and maintenance. In addition to this, the local authority also facilitates educational nature-based programmes targeting particular groups of people who are likely to benefit from such an experience. The Tree Pips project, for example, involves school children planting a total of 36,000 trees across Bristol, which is combined with an educational package to increase awareness of tree benefits.

In addition to this, there are a number of projects involving environmental NGOs, research institutes and businesses. Partnerships between such non-governmental actors fulfil a variety of purposes ranging from promoting ideas on creating a more sustainable city and educating the public about the natural world to protecting biodiversity within the city. There are several particularly active NGOs, such as Avon Wildlife Trust, Woodland Trust, Forest of Avon, CPRE Avonside, which participate in a wide range of partnerships and also provide advice to the local authority on management of green spaces. They are therefore likely to have some influence over green space planning and maintenance in Bristol.

Supporting and hindering factors in participation as perceived by city officials
The participation of non-governmental actors is facilitated by Bristol Council’s strategic approach to involve local people in green space governance and planning. This builds upon a longer tradition of community action in Bristol. According to the interviewed city official, some funding and resources are made available for community engage-
ment. It also conceived that the recent decision by the UK government to relax regulations imposed on local authorities, as well as to introduce new instruments for community participation (e.g., neighbourhood planning), has led some community groups to become more actively involved. Despite increased powers granted to local authorities to respond flexibly to local initiatives, restrictions to the level of influence non-governmental actors can exert over local authority decision-making still apply. That is, the local authority has a duty to ensure spatial planning is in agreement with national policies. Another factor that could hinder some initiatives is the high time pressure on local authority officials, which slows down responding and/or decision-making in some cases. A final, and most significant, challenge around community participation is underrepresentation of certain groups within society in local initiatives for reasons such as busy lifestyles and family commitments. This poses a threat to democratic decision-making and therefore almost inevitably limits the degree of influence non-government actors can exert.

Examples of initiatives coming from local stakeholders

**Meadow Bristol project**

The aim of the Meadow Bristol project is to sow wildflower meadows in existing green spaces making them more attractive for pollinators and people alike. New meadows are partly funded by private donations; businesses are actively approached for sponsorships. One of the partners of Meadow Bristol is the Urban Pollinators Project. This £1.3 million project has been commissioned by the University of Bristol and research partners to study pollinators in urban meadows. Bristol City Council endorses this project as the research will enable it to engage in more informed decision-making around choice of plant species for green borders, mainly in parks and next to roads.

![Meadow Bristol project](photo: Katherine Baldock, Urban Pollinators Project)

**The Bristol Natural History Consortium**

The Bristol Natural History Consortium (BNHC) is both a charitable organisation with members and a staff team, and a consortium of stakeholders from a variety of environmental NGOs and businesses. BNHC has the aim to improve local people’s understanding of, and engagement with, the natural world. They organize BioBlitz events to generate data on biodiversity and to promote citizen science. Amongst their activities is also the organisation of an annual Bristol Festival of Nature with exhibitions, workshops and events to increase understanding of, and engagement with, the natural environment. Although their activities do not target one single green space, they lead to improved wildlife monitoring and environmental awareness of the local population.

![The Bristol Natural History Consortium](photo: Sophie Cook, 2014)
4) URBAN GREEN INFRASTRUCTURE (UGI) THEMES AND STRATEGIES

Main themes related to urban green space

Bristol City Council underscores the important role green spaces play in promoting healthy lifestyles and social inclusion. The Parks and Green Space Strategy outlines the approach that is taken to provide diverse, accessible green spaces, supporting a wide range of recreational activities, to all local people. Related to this theme is the ambition to deliver integrated, well-connected green spaces, which is covered by the Local Plan.

Green space is also on the local agenda because of its role in climate change adaptation and mitigation. The Council has the ambition to plant more trees (e.g., Tree Pips project) and promote the use of sustainable drainage systems such as green roofs.

Bristol is home to research institutes, businesses and consultants that are at the forefront of developing innovative ideas on green space provision and sustainable living. Where possible, the council aims to make use of those ideas in new developments. Green economy thinking is also apparent in a number of local authority initiatives: it generates its own energy from biomass and wind turbines.

Understanding of UGI and representation of UGI principles

Both analysed plans from Bristol acknowledge the concept of UGI. The Core Strategy describes green infrastructure as: “the network of green assets that can work together to support sustainability and quality of life within and around Bristol. These networks bring many social, economic and environmental benefits.” Aiming at connectivity the green infrastructure shall include walking and cycle routes, public rights of way, accessible river corridors and green and create an urban environment that encourages physical activity as part of everyday life. Furthermore, connectivity for wildlife is considered.

The green infrastructure will provide linkages across the city and connections to the wider regional green space network. Green infrastructure is seen as integrated with the water system and as being central for reducing water run-off and providing flood storage capacity.

Multifunctionality is embedded in the consideration of the green infrastructure but not pursued as a separate objective in Bristol’s planning documents. Green infrastructure is considered as providing several social, economic and environmental benefits, and by enhancing the network provision of these benefits shall be increased.

Bristol Local Plan: Core Strategy

Date: 2011

Responsible department(s): Planning, Transport and Sustainable Development

Spatial scale: City

Legal status: Non-binding, but approved by politics

Main themes related to urban green space

- Creating a high quality natural environment that conserves and enhances valued open spaces and biodiversity and maintains a green infrastructure network
- Improving of accessibility and connectivity

Parallels with GREEN-SURGE policy concepts

- Biodiversity
- Adaptation to climate change
- Health
- Social cohesion
Implementation and evaluation

Both the Local Plan and Parks and the Green Space Strategy have been published along with an action plan including site-specific proposals. These are described in the Site Allocations & Development Policies Document and Area Green Space Plans (at neighbourhood level), respectively.

According to the views of interviewed city officials, the availability of funding plays a crucial role in the degree to which these action plans are successfully implemented. Maintenance (especially that of sites of conservation interest that require intensive management) and monitoring are particularly sensitive to any budget squeezes. As a result of a nation-wide trend for less direct local Government management of green spaces, the role of community involvement in green space maintenance and monitoring is likely to become more significant.

Monitoring of social, environmental and economic issues and implementation of policies, culminating in an Annual Monitoring Report, is done on a yearly basis for the Local Plan. Both the Local Plan and the Parks and Green Space Strategy are comprehensively reviewed and updated every five years.

Bristol Parks and Green Space Strategy
Date: 2008
Responsible department(s): Environment and Leisure Department
Spatial scale: City
Legal status: Non-binding, but approved by politics

Main themes related to urban green space
- Improvement of quantity and quality
- Accessibility

Parallels with GREEN-SURGE policy concepts
- Health
- Social cohesion
Views of what biocultural diversity is referring to and how it is addressed in policy

The recently developed concept of biocultural diversity is currently not widely used by Bristol City Council, but awareness of the role urban green space plays in shaping cultural identity, and vice versa, is reflected in the Parks and Green Space Strategy. This document acknowledges the role of green space in community functioning and introduces policies to provide accessible green spaces of different types to all citizens. It is recognized that different people have different needs and the Council strives to offer a range of green spaces in response. Further, the Council applies distance standards, reflecting local citizen’s willingness to walk to a green space of a particular type, to guide decision-making on where particular types of green spaces might need to be developed. This reflects an understanding of the importance of creating inclusive outdoor spaces that appeal to a wide range of users.

Biodiversity is an important theme in urban green space planning, as evidenced by policies in the Local Plan and a variety of biodiversity-themed partnership initiatives. The role of ecological corridors and urban biotopes such as parks and gardens in maintaining specific assemblages of biodiversity are recognised. According to the interviewed city official, there should be an emphasis on predominantly native species in sites of nature conservation, but the aesthetic benefits of non-native species growing in urban parks and gardens are also recognised.

In respect to cultural diversity, the neighbourhood planning approach, and other governance arrangements allowing communities to influence green space decision-making, provide opportunities for accommodating the green space uses, needs and values of specific cultural and user groups. Examples of local involvement include Friends of Parks groups and initiatives such as the Wild City project that focused on working together with users to improve parks.

Maintaining and enhancing the diversity of the cultural built heritage and landscapes of different areas in the city is integral to the Council’s approach to urban design and planning, which is reflected in the Legible City concept applied to city planning by the Council’s City Design Group. This implies that spatial planning focuses on improving the cultural identity of the city, taking into account the cultural heritage, as a centre of trading and industrial activity (see below).

Bristol aims to improve its position as an innovative hub for the development of new ideas and technology in the area of sustainable living. It could therefore be conceived as a trendsetter of cultural practices related to urban green spaces. This is reflected into policies to promote innovative approaches towards sustainable housing featuring green roofs, walls and urban draining systems. The Council also employs a team of (landscape) architects, the City Design group, who comment on and deliver (bespoke) spatial planning projects (including design of landscapes and green features). The group designs in agreement with local people’s needs and desires to create neighbourhoods that provide a sense of place and reflect dynamic cultural values in living with biodiversity.

Bioculturally significant places

The multifaceted approach towards conservation and management of biodiversity is reflected in the designations of not only Bristol Local Nature Reserves, the Meadow Bristol project and the Wild City project, but also in the provision of allotments.

Much attention is also given towards maintaining and increasing the cultural identity of the city. Remnants of historical times are visible in the modern make-up of the city. This includes not only historic parks, but also new forms of biocultural diversity. The floating harbour, traditionally the port of Bristol, now acts as the cultural centre of the city,
and one illustrative example for biocultural diversity is the Floating Ballast Seed Garden. This garden, positioned on a disused grain vessel, displays an array of non-native plant species of which the seeds have been germinated from samples of earth dug up in areas where ship ballasts used to be dumped. This ballast was used to compensate for the lack of cargo on ships returning from trading expeditions, and therefore contained plant seeds from all over the world. The plants on this vessel can be found at various places along the river where the ballast was offloaded. This project is the result of a partnership between the University of Bristol, Bristol City Council, Arnolfini and local schools.

Floating Ballast Seed Garden (photo: Alexander van der Jagt, 2014)
6) CONCLUSION

Bristol is a rapidly growing city that is an important national and European hub for innovative ideas and solutions about sustainable living. Bristol has a variety of green spaces that are actively used by local residents for recreational purposes. The city has the ambition to improve distribution of green spaces across the city such that all residents have access to high quality green space that serves their needs. The commitment of the local authority and various local stakeholders to making Bristol a healthier, sustainable city with attractive, well-distributed and user-friendly green spaces has earned it the European Green Capital 2015 award.

Bristol has a long tradition of community involvement in green space maintenance and decision-making. This is evidenced by a large number of Friends of Parks groups, council-owned allotment gardens and initiatives such as Tree Pips focusing on community tree planting and education. There are also a range of networks with NGOs, businesses and researchers that aim to educate and engage the population with the natural environment through a variety of activities. Community involvement has intensified since introduction of the Localism Act 2011, which reduced regulations imposed on local government and introduced instruments enabling local people to have a stronger influence on decisions influencing their neighbourhoods. Furthermore, regional planning authorities have been abolished, providing a less top-down, more transparent, approach to spatial planning.

The Bristol Local Plan and the Parks and Green Space Strategy currently represent the two key documents driving decision-making around green spaces. These highlight the need to: (1) address health inequalities through providing accessible, varied green spaces and (2) improving the green network, and adaptation to climate change through tree planting and flood prevention measures. Another key area of interest is the development of a green economy. To this end, the local authority aims to lead by example and supports innovative ideas and practices of non-governmental actors through partnership working.

The concept and relevance of biocultural diversity is implicitly acknowledged within the strategic approach to green space planning. Local people contributed to identifying the issues and setting the standards and policies within the key green space planning documents and are provided with opportunities to influence green space planning and decision-making (e.g., selection of plant species) at the neighbourhood level. The existing planning system provides scope for specific user and cultural groups to become actively involved in spatial planning on their own accord through instruments such as Neighbourhood Planning.
Links and References

Websites of municipality and core organizations
- **Bristol City Council**: www.bristol.gov.uk/
- **Bristol European Green Capital 2015**: bristolgreencapital.org/ and www.bristol2015.co.uk/
- **Bristol Natural History Consortium**: www.bnhc.org.uk/
- **Bristol Parks Forum**: www.bristolparksforum.org.uk/
- **West of England Nature Partnership**: www.wenp.org.uk/

References

**For facts in Introduction:**
- **Area core city and larger urban zone**: *Urban Atlas*.
- **Population core city and larger urban zone** (2012 or latest): mainly *Urban Audit*. Note: in a few cases the population numbers have been provided by researchers based on statistical data
- **Average annual population change rate** (Core city; 1990-2012 or similar): calculated \[((100*population number last year / population number first year) -100)/(last year – first year)\] based on *Urban Audit*.
- **Public recreational green space** (Core city; m² per inhabitants; 2006): based on *Urban Audit* and *Urban Atlas*. Urban Atlas defines urban green space as “public green areas for predominantly recreational use”. Peri-urban natural areas, such as forests and agricultural land, are mapped as green urban areas only in certain cases. In general, peri-urban green areas are not counted. Private green and blue areas are also not included. Further, green spaces with less than 250 m² are not mapped as well. This leads to deviation with per capita green space values used by city officials
- **Map of Larger Urban Zone**: based *Urban Atlas*.


**For the rest:**
- **Interview** with Nick Michael, City of Bristol, Environment & Leisure on 10th September 2014
- **Interview** with Richard Ennion, City of Bristol, Environment & Leisure on 16th September 2014
- **Bristol City Council** (2014). *Neighbourhood Planning in Bristol*. Available from: www.bristol.gov.uk/page/-
planning-and-building-regulations/neighbourhood-planning-bristol#jump-link-2; accessed 18/07/2014.


### Planning and policy documents


### Acknowledgements

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