Concept Note for the

AIPH Green City Standard

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Contents

1. Introduction

Urban greening offers a holistic solution to the pressing challenges of urbanisation, creating resilient, sustainable, and livable cities that balance economic growth with environmental stewardship. Since its founding in 1948, AIPH (the International Association of Horticultural Producers) has been a global advocate for the transformative power of plants. Today AIPH is the leading voice of the world's €400 billion horticultural industry. Through initiatives such as the AIPH Green City initiative and the International Horticultural Expos–which draw millions of visitors and leave lasting green legacies–AIPH actively promotes the greening of cities across the world.

By 2050, cities are expected to host an additional 2.4 billion people, hosting over two-thirds of the global population. Cities already account for 60 to 80% of global energy use, 75% of natural resource consumption, and 70% of greenhouse gas emissions. While urbanisation, particularly in the Global South, presents opportunities for economic development and poverty reduction, it also intensifies challenges such as biodiversity loss, climate change, and pollution. Unchecked, poorly planned urban growth exposes cities to escalating risks–rising sea levels, flooding, and heat stress, to name but a few–underscoring the imperative for innovative, scalable solutions.

The AIPH Green City Standard provides cities with a robust, plant-centric framework to plan, implement, measure, and refine their urban greening strategies. By offering a clear and

actionable roadmap, the AIPH Standard empowers cities to achieve measurable environmental, social, and economic benefits, including strengthened climate resilience, enriched biodiversity, and improved quality of life. In turn, these outcomes can enhance city competitiveness, elevate brand equity, and foster civic pride.

The AIPH Green City Standard is a flexible, non-prescriptive framework that empowers cities to adapt it to their unique circumstances and priorities, while continually measuring improvement. This approach allows the AIPH Standard to support a diverse range of cities, from those only beginning their urban greening journey to cities whose efforts are already world-renowned. By valuing locally appropriate strategies, the AIPH Standard helps cities achieve their urban greening goals while aligning with national and global sustainability objectives.

Rooted in decades of horticultural expertise and informed by a global network of partners, the AIPH Green City Standard integrates best practices to help cities design and direct interventions, monitor progress, demonstrate return on investment, and ultimately, achieve meaningful impact. This concept note outlines the vision, methodology, and structure of the AIPH Green City Standard, setting the stage for its further development.

2. Methodology

The development of the AIPH Green City Standard is grounded in a rigorous methodology aligned with the International Social and Environmental Accreditation and Labelling Alliance (ISEAL) Code of Good Practice for Sustainability Systems, ensuring transparency, inclusivity, and global credibility. This approach incorporates comprehensive research, active stakeholder consultations, and pilot testing to ensure practicality and relevance. It also emphasises iterative refinement, systematically integrating feedback at every stage to drive continuous improvement.

- **Research and expertise:** The AIPH Standard draws on decades of horticultural expertise and a thorough review of international best practices in urban greening.
- **Stakeholder engagement:** We are consulting with local governments, NGOs, private sector partners, and international organisations to ensure the AIPH Standard addresses diverse needs.

- **Pilot testing:** The framework will be piloted in select cities to test its applicability and refine its structure.
- **Alignment with sustainability system best practices:** We are aligning our methodology with best practices in sustainability systems (including on transparency and governance) to enhance international credibility and efficacy.
- **Iterative development:** Feedback from stakeholders, pilot cities, and global partners is integrated to ensure the AIPH Standard is practical, measurable, and impactful.

3. Theory of Change

The AIPH Green City Standard is built on a Theory of Change. As depicted in Figure 1, this theory-based approach defines the problem space and describes the responding intervention, elaborates causal pathways from inputs to impacts, and forefronts assumptions.
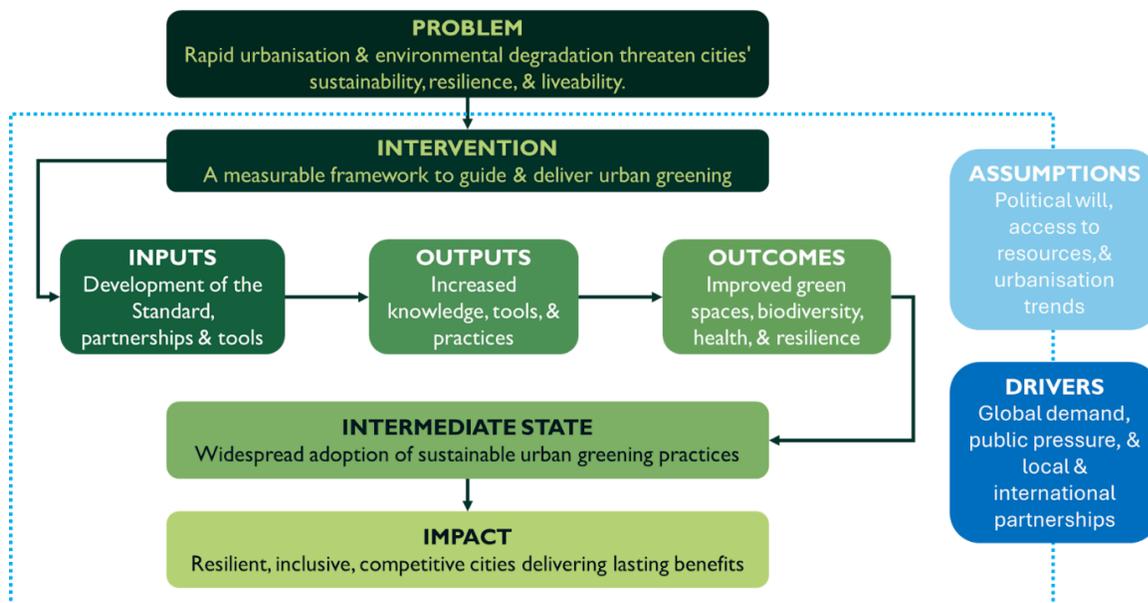

Figure 1. Schematic overview of the Theory of Change underpinning the AIPH Green City Standard.

4. Scope

The scope of the AIPH Green City Standard is deliberately focused on plants and their role in urban greening. By concentrating on horticultural practices, biodiversity and ecosystem services, the AIPH Standard leverages AIPH's strengths and expertise.

The AIPH Green City Standard does not encompass all aspects of urban metabolism and sustainability. Issues such as energy systems, food production, and waste management are outside its scope, except where they intersect directly with plant-based urban greening. For instance, while the AIPH Standard addresses biodiversity-friendly procurement, it does not assess broader ecological footprints. Similarly, water management is considered only in relation to green infrastructure, such as rainwater harvesting and phytoremediation.

This delineated scope ensures that the AIPH Standard remains focused, actionable, and aligned with AIPH's core mission while complementing other sustainability frameworks.

5. Structure

The AIPH Green City Standard is structured around a set of eight city-led processes that collectively guide cities toward achieving excellence in urban greening. These processes are designed to address the entire lifecycle of urban greening initiatives, from understanding baseline conditions to sharing achievements and lessons learned. The eight processes are as follows:

- **Analyse**: Establishing baseline conditions through data collection, risk assessment and analysis of existing green spaces.
- **Plan**: Setting clear targets, developing strategic priorities and integrating urban greening into broader urban plans.
- **Engage**: Ensuring inclusive stakeholder participation, fostering multi-level governance and building strong partnerships.
- **Act**: Implementing policies and projects, allocating resources, and ensuring maintenance and sustainability.
- **Impact**: Demonstrating tangible social, economic and environmental outcomes.
- **Monitor**: Tracking progress through robust indicators and frameworks, conducting regular reviews and adapting to new challenges.

- **Adapt**: Embracing continuous improvement by learning from successes and failures, and integrating new knowledge into practices.
- **Share**: Promoting urban greening outcomes, sharing lessons learned and inspiring other cities to adopt similar approaches.

Each of these eight processes is further divided into subcategories of urban greening outcomes, as depicted in Table 1.

Table 1. Structure of the AIPH Green City Standard.

Outcomes from Integrating Urban Greening into Existing City-Led Processes

Existing City-Led Process	Ideal Urban Greening Integration:	Urban Greening Influenced Outcomes											
A - Analyse	The city has put in place foundational elements which allow it to understand its urban greening status as a reference point/baseline against which future improvements will be assessed	1 - Habitat Data (Baseline) Collected	2 - Environmental Risks and Vulnerabilities Assessed and Mapped	3 - Key Issues Documented	4 - Governance Structure Assessed	5 - National and Global Priorities Localised							
B - Plan	The city adopts ambitious, evidence-based and integrated planning to deliver effective urban greening	1 - A Strong Vision Developed	2 - Local Goals, Objectives, Targets and Indicators Set	3 - Commitments Made	4 - Urban Greening Embedded in Land Use Development Planning	5 - Urban Greening Mainstreamed in Integrated Planning Processes at Appropriate Scales	6 - Priority Actions Developed	7 - Appropriate Plant Selection and Preparation Considered					
C - Engage	The city ensures broad and inclusive stakeholder engagement in the design and delivery of urban greening initiatives.	1 - Internal Coordination Between Local Government Departments in Place	2 - Extensive Stakeholder Mapping Completed	3 - All Relevant Stakeholders Engaged	4 - Strong Multi-Level Governance Approach in Place	5 - Connected with Other Cities and Towns							
D - Act	The city takes bold action for urban greening, supported with adequate resources and strong policy	1 - Budget Allocated	2 - Resources Allocated with Roles and Responsibilities	3 - Actions Implemented	4 - Policy Developed and Implemented	5 - Appropriate Legislation in Place	6 - Green Public Procurement Strategies Deployed	7 - Ongoing Maintenance Ensured					
E - Impact	The city can demonstrate how its urban greening efforts are engendering tangible social, economic and environmental outcomes.	1 - Access and Equity Improved	2 - Biodiversity and Ecosystem Restoration Enhanced	3 - Effective Climate Change Adaptation (heat island/flooding) and Mitigation (carbon sequestration/neutrality) in Place	4 - Network of Urban Green Spaces (Parks, gardens, forests etc) Increased and Improved	5 - Improved Human Health and Wellbeing and Reduced Healthcare costs (physical and mental)	6 - Increased Green Infrastructure, particularly Nature-based Solutions	7 - Liveability Improved (Active Lifestyles and Time Outdoors)	8 - Social Cohesion and Community Engagement Advancements	9 - Demonstrable Economic Growth and Development (property values, tourism, green jobs)	10 - Urban Agriculture and Food Production Established	11 - Soil and Air Quality (oxygen release/NRM) Improved	12 - Improved Resilience and Disaster Risk Reduction
F - Monitor	The city tracks progress in urban greening through a robust monitoring framework, conducting regular reviews and reporting outcomes.	1 - Monitoring in Place (Measure Progress)	2 - Internal Reviews in Place	3 - Regular Reporting on Progress (Locally)	4 - Regular Reporting on Progress (National and Global)								
G - Adapt	The city commits to continuous improvement by developing adaptive processes for evolving urban greening needs.	1 - Mechanisms and Processes for Continuous Review Developed	2 - Continuous Improvement through Adaptation Ensured										
H - Share	The city raises awareness, promotes impacts, and shares knowledge to inspire other cities and stakeholders to embrace urban greening.	1 - Raised Awareness	2 - Education and Outreach Activities Undertaken	3 - Actions and the Impact Promoted	4 - Lessons Communicated	5 - Knowledge Shared							

For each urban greening outcome, detailed guidance is provided, including:
- **Ideal states**: Descriptions of the aspirational goals cities should strive to achieve.
- **Indicators**: Clear and measurable metrics for assessing progress.
- **Scoring criteria**: Simple scoring system to evaluate performance and identify areas for improvement.
- **Exemplars (best-practice case studies)**: Real-world examples of cities excelling in specific areas, selected for inspiration, practical insights, and diversity of context.
- **Relevant tools and frameworks**: References to practical tools and best-practice to help cities implement effective solutions.

The AIPH Green City Standard provides cities with a clear roadmap, actionable guidance, real-world examples, and links to relevant resources. Its flexible, non-prescriptive framework empowers cities to adapt it to their unique circumstances and priorities, whether they are

embarking on new greening initiatives or enhancing established efforts. By supporting locally appropriate strategies, the AIPH Standard helps cities achieve their urban greening goals while aligning with national and global sustainability objectives.

6. Value Proposition

By adopting the AIPH Green City Standard, cities can unlock significant environmental, social, and economic benefits while positioning themselves as global leaders in sustainability.

The AIPH Standard provides a foundation for certification and awards, such as the prestigious AIPH World Green City Awards, offering cities a platform for international recognition. By showcasing their commitment to urban greening, cities can enhance their brand equity and attract talent, investment, and tourism.

Greener, more beautiful urban environments boost civic pride, improve residents' quality of life, and sharpen global competitiveness. Additionally, the AIPH Standard equips cities to address climate and environmental challenges effectively, fostering adaptability and securing a vibrant, sustainable future.

7. Target audience

The AIPH Green City Standard is intended for a wide range of stakeholders, with local governments as the primary audience. Cities and municipalities are the key drivers of urban transformation, and the AIPH Standard equips them with the foci, metrics and strategies needed to integrate nature into urban planning and governance. Regional or national governments will find value in supporting their cities to work towards implementing the AIPH Green City Standard.

The AIPH Standard is also relevant to horticultural and landscape professionals, who play a critical role in the design, implementation and maintenance of urban greening projects.

Additionally, it may be of interest to businesses and donors supporting urban greening initiatives. Indeed, by offering recognition and measurable outcomes, the AIPH Standard provides an attractive opportunity for investment and sponsorship.

Finally, the AIPH Standard is valuable for urban networks, non-governmental organisations and advocacy groups that work to advance urban sustainability, liveability and resilience.

The work of implementing the AIPH Standard will inherently require collaboration across departments and sectors, thereby advancing partnerships and integrated approaches to urban sustainability.

8. Governance

The governance structure for the AIPH Green City Standard is designed to ensure transparency, inclusivity, and alignment with best practices, supporting its robust development, implementation, and continuous improvement. As per Table 2 below, the governance arrangements involve a number of bodies, each with a distinct composition and function.

The Steering Committee provides oversight and strategic direction, ensuring alignment with sustainability system best practices and managing resources. The Stakeholder Advisory Group offers guidance and feedback, ensuring inclusivity and relevance, while the Technical Working Groups develop indicators, scoring systems, and accreditation criteria. The Pilot City Network tests and validates the framework, providing real-world feedback that informs both the Technical Working Groups and the Stakeholder Advisory Group.

Independent Evaluators conduct impartial city assessments during the accreditation process, reporting findings to the Steering Committee. The Independent Review Panel resolves disputes, ensuring credibility and fairness in the governance process.

Table 2. Governance bodies involved in the development, management, and curation of the AIPH Green City Standard.

Body	Composition	Function
Steering Committee	AIPH leads, external experts, city reps.	Oversee framework development, testing, promotion, accreditation, & claims while managing

		resources & ensuring compliance with the sustainability system best practice.
Stakeholder Advisory Group	Local governments, NGOs, businesses, etc.	Provide feedback, ensure inclusivity, highlight risks, & validate the relevance of the framework, accreditation, & claims systems.
Technical Working Group	Subject experts in urban greening, certification, and sustainability.	Develop indicators, scoring systems, accreditation criteria, & claims guidelines while aligning the framework with global best practices.
Pilot City Network	Cities from diverse geographic, economic & cultural contexts.	Test & validate the framework, accreditation processes, & claims systems while providing real-world feedback & sharing lessons learned.
Independent Review Panel	Neutral experts appointed as needed.	Handle grievances & disputes impartially, ensuring credibility in the framework, accreditation, & claims systems.
Independent Evaluators	Qualified experts without conflicts of interest.	Conduct impartial assessments of cities' performance against the AIPH Standard's criteria to verify claims.

The Accreditation and Claims System is integral to validating cities' achievements, with clear pathways for recognition through independent third party evaluations. The Global Recognition Mechanism celebrates the achievements of accredited cities and elevates their international visibility through initiatives such as the AIPH World Green City Awards. Together, these bodies and mechanisms interact through structured communication and feedback loops, ensuring the AIPH Standard's ongoing improvement and global impact (see figure 2).
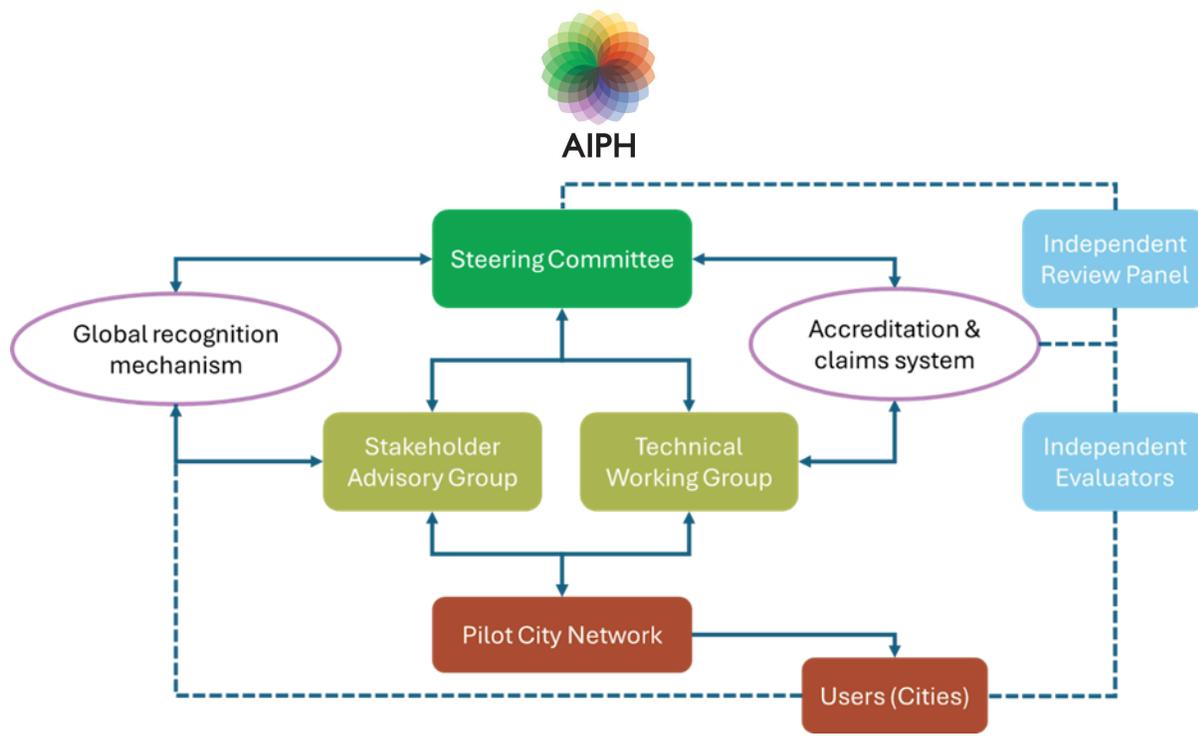
Figure 2. Governance arrangements for the AIPH Green City AIPH Standards.

9. Conclusion

By focusing on plants and their myriad benefits, the AIPH Green City Standard addresses a critical need in the urban sustainability space. It provides cities with a clear, actionable framework to harness the power of plants to achieve measurable improvements in biodiversity, climate resilience, public health and economic growth. Through its targeted scope, robust indicators, and emphasis on collaboration, the AIPH Standard has the potential to inspire and guide cities worldwide. AIPH invites donors, sponsors, and stakeholders to support the development and rollout of the AIPH Standard, creating a greener, healthier, and more sustainable future for all.