



GreenSpace South East Response

White Paper: The Natural Choice – securing the value of nature

Defra June 2011

GreenSpace SE, their partner organisations and those they represent, welcome the publication of the first significant piece of legislation relating to the English natural environment for over 20 years. The Defra White Paper, The Natural Choice – securing the value of nature, will for the first time embed economic valuation of Ecosystem Services (ES), and therefore, the value of our landscape, marine and coastal areas, countryside, parks and green spaces across government departments. The paper recognises the cross-cutting benefits that the natural environment provides to human communities, in terms of resources, health and well-being and maintaining a stable local and global climate.

GreenSpace has long advocated the benefits of parks, open spaces and green infrastructure (GI). The emphasis on enabling better quality, accessibility and the creation of new green spaces in our villages, town and cities reflects the views from members of our professional and voluntary network. Valuing the cost of local GI will provide communities with new tools for managing open spaces to increase ES, delivering sustainable development and improving local outcomes.

KEY MESSAGES AND COMMITMENTS

Local Nature Partnerships

The government will establish Local Nature Partnerships (LNPs), bringing together cross-boundary organisations to “work at a strategic scale to improve the range of benefits and services we get from a healthy natural environment”. The LNPs are to operate in a similar way to Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs); indeed, they are to work with LEPs to promote economic growth, sustainable developments and environmental improvements through quality GI. They are further encouraged to work with local authorities, national organisations such as English Heritage, Health and Well-Being Boards and other local groups. This is to be welcomed; however, there are concerns regarding funding and capacity from within an already stretched sector. The £1m one-off fund available 2011/12 to develop LNPs, shared between approximately 50 partnerships, provides a very limited capital investment upon which to build such important networks.

To achieve the integration and enhancement of nature and landscape, from rural countryside and farmland to urban parks and gardens, will require significant efforts and actions from the LNPs. There are great opportunities for innovation and learning, enabling local communities to understand the wider value of nature, translating this into policies and practice to enhance ES. A huge number of charitable, voluntary and community organisations already give energy, time and dedication to improve their environments. Best value is already achieved through tenacity and wiliness; limited resources are available to maintain and preserve habitats. To improve and enhance ES at any scale will require additional funding.

GreenSpace SE supports the development of LNPs, and in most of the UK, through our Regional Forums, already sustain networks of local authority professionals, environmental organisations and community and volunteer groups who manage and maintain green space. By ensuring these existing networks partner LNPs, further value can be achieved through dissemination of the process, learning and plans widely throughout the UK. Brokering links between organisations, forums and cross-cutting strategic partnerships, to advocate the benefits of GI and improve the quality and management of those spaces has been the main charitable outcome for GreenSpace for over 12 years. The combined vision, experience and knowledge of the GreenSpace, and GreenSpace SE, network is an asset to the development of this approach to nature preservation and improvement. We strongly hope that Defra considers the inclusion of GreenSpace SE within LNPs as an important partner, utilising our existing knowledge and sharing new learning across the UK.

Nature Improvement Areas

In response to the Lawton report, Making Space for Nature, the recommendation to restore ecological zones through Nature Improvement Areas (NIAs) is to be welcomed. To pilot the schemes a competition is being run to initiate 12 projects, to which funding of £7.5m during 2011-14 has been allocated. NIAs will work to restore habitats and increase their size, create links between important areas, enabling species to move more freely between natural spaces and improvement management. As recognised by the Lawton report and the NEA significant areas of GI, both rural and urban, is fragmented and therefore provides ES at reduced capacity.

GreenSpace SE again supports this initiative, which for the first time will attempt to address the problems of GI fragmentation. GreenSpace SE has the capacity to share learning from the pilot projects throughout our network, ensuring that vital knowledge and experience is shared widely. Care needs to be taken in the speed with which the NIA bids are requested and submitted; initial projects need to show robust evidence of how improvements and connectivity enhance ES, through monitoring and evaluation, to agreed national indicator targets and outcomes, and prove future management and long-term viability. National targets and outcomes allow projects to be benchmarked against other environmental initiatives, effectively monitoring one against another. Many indicator sets exist, such as UK priority species and habitats, but others, such as delivering greater cultural ES, are in development stage. Coordination between the pilot schemes at a strategic level will be needed to deliver optimum outcomes for the natural environment.

Halting the loss of biodiversity across the UK by 2020 is an ambitious target. It is also a sad reflection on the current state of affairs and a reason to move as quickly as possible towards balanced modern living within our natural environment. GreenSpace SE is well placed to provide links between local authorities, environmental organisations and community groups to share learning and the development of strategies and plans. Having access to and the ability to use high-quality GI has been shown to increase public awareness and care for their environment and nature. Events, activities and community projects held in green spaces act as catalysts to public consumer and lifestyle behaviour changes. GreenSpace SE knows that

the great number of events, for example those held during the annual Love Parks Week, add to the community cohesion, health and well-being of their many participants, and furthermore provide benefits to wildlife. Participation in environmental projects, or by purely visiting a local green space at an event or otherwise, can influence an individual's thinking; providing a better understanding of wildlife, perhaps returning home to improve their own gardens for wildlife or making more sustainable travel choices. We will continue to advocate the importance of parks and green spaces, good management and community engagement across the sector.

Biodiversity Offsets and the Planning System

GreenSpace SE has concerns about this section of the White Paper. Whilst we support sustainable development and economic growth through 'green' business and resource awareness, the recommended Biodiversity Offset as an idea, is flawed. The current system of Section 106 (S106) contributions and its new relation, the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL), already provide developers and local authorities' opportunities to provide monies towards enhancement and improvements to local GI or other facilities. The policies and systems in place vary significantly from area to area; minimum numbers of houses trigger payments, location or lack of open space affect the potential for GI enhancements with various other restrictions decided during negotiations. The lack of lead from government in defining acceptable payments has created winners and losers in local communities across the UK. GreenSpace SE has talked with many practitioners who fear that insisting on reasonable S106 contributions from developers, without restrictions or claw-back clauses, can lead to areas becoming less attractive investment sites than neighbouring authorities, who might or can afford to ask for less. Other problems also include; clauses where restrictions are made on spending contribution to within a specified area close to the development, ignoring the wider needs assessment; or, of most concern, time restrictions on the spend of contributions meaning developers can recoup payments after lapse of a specified time.

An additional payment of Biodiversity Offsets, as proposed in its voluntary form, will only add further to the differences across communities, based upon socio-economic boundaries. There is also genuine concern that such offset payments mitigate a need to consider alternative sites, or that the payments cannot truly cover the cost of habitat loss. For example, the proposed High Speed Two rail route will pass through three registered parks and gardens and 21 Ancient Woodlands. The latter is an impossible loss to mitigate; ancient woodland is, by definition, ancient and not replaceable through new woodland regeneration schemes or management techniques, only time and natural processes deliver such unique high-functioning ecosystems.

Integrating the value of nature and GI within new developments, and through enhancing existing built environment, needs to be a priority for the planning system. The need to balance economic growth and sustainable development with community aspirations in Local Plans will be challenging. The presumption in favour of sustainable development must be backed by robust standards of building and environmental quality. Without strong definition and best practice guidance regarding the built environment there is the possibility of wide

variances of quality in terms of design, build materials and use of sustainable technologies, future adaptation and integration into existing infrastructure and communities. The presumption in favour of sustainable development should be assumed only when the development proposed is of the highest possible quality and standard.

GreenSpace SE strongly advocates the integration of the natural environment within existing built environments and new developments through a clear National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). High quality, linked, multi-functional landscapes, those that provide recreation, habitat diversity, climate change adaptation solutions and risk mitigation, are needed to deliver the greatest benefits economically, socially and environmentally. The NPPF must reflect a consistent approach to quality and design, recognising the impact this will have on the future ambitions for the UK. All new buildings and infrastructure can be designed now to incorporate environmental benefits; flat roofs should always be green roofs, bird and bat boxes can be designed into buildings and sustainable urban drainage should be the norm. Creating new developments which include low-cost and simple, yet effective, environmental adaptations, will provide a blue-print by which, the existing built environment can be enhanced retrospectively. Mosaics of green roofs, encouraged through business or community partnerships, will greatly enhance the effect of urban GI and its benefits, increasing urban biodiversity, reducing the Urban Heat Island Effect and improving stormwater management.

Large-scale retrofitting and enhancement of GI throughout urban areas though, as with adapting the UK's existing housing stock for low-energy consumption, presents many challenges. Partnerships and voluntary agreements will not alone deliver the quantity of new GI, within many of our urban environments, required to manage a changing climate. The Community Right to Reclaim Land is a welcome step to bring back unmanaged areas of GI into a wider managed network, whilst providing communities the opportunity to create housing and business areas that meet local needs. There is a good opportunity to extend this further to private land-banks within urban areas. Many community groups have taken over derelict brownfield land, private and publicly owned, both with consent and without, to develop community gardens. These have provided, and continue to provide in some cases, significant cultural ES in terms of mental health and well-being and community cohesion. They can also deliver functioning areas of GI, creating stepping stones of ecological networks that would only improve with time, and are often places whereby wider messages of sustainability are promoted. Community projects, such as these, should also be offered opportunities to continue existing in the long-term, reflecting the values set out in the Localism Bill.

Assessment of National Ecosystem Services and a Green Economy

In conjunction with the publication of the White Paper the National Ecosystem Assessment (NEA) has also been published. This document sets out the model for valuing ES, how value is increased by management at large scales to improve ES, it demonstrates the decline of important habitats and the need to refine and improve the model. Also published are additional supporting research and publications nationally and internationally, for example The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity (TEEB).

By utilising these reports and the methodology described to value ES, the UK will be leading the direction internationally, for future growth aligned with sustainable resource use. GreenSpace SE strongly supports the focus on valuing the nation's natural capital assets. There are great opportunities for growth around the 'green' sector; sustainable tourism, recycling UK waste, technologies that improve efficiencies, retrofitting of the existing built environment and SME start-ups. Starting this process now is essential to achieve the ambitious European targets that the UK has signed up to.

Collaboration between the new Green Economy Council and the work that the Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP) undertake will be essential in closing the loop for resource use. Ensuring that the LNP's and LEP's also work collaboratively will help to shape local design and planning, whilst further disseminating peer-based decision making and business practice. Cross-working will be needed to fully explore and understand the benefits that are derived from the natural world and how they can be used, managed and improved to benefit business, local people and achieve environmental targets.

Although some opportunities exist to incentivise payment for ES, such as the case study described in the North West of England, care needs to be taken when following this approach. As described during the FRESH VI seminars, much of their work feeding into the NEA and therefore this White Paper, there is some concern about creating markets for ES. By understanding the true value of ES, the embedded natural capital of any product, can be determined. However, market trading needs to be well-managed and ensure that traded ES is sustainable; resources are finite and offsetting ES through market trading needs to be coupled with reducing resource use, making better use of recycled resources, monitoring and assisting supply chains and reducing our own international footprint.

Reconnecting People and Nature

GreenSpace SE champions the benefits of nature to people through networks of parks and green spaces. The growing evidence base relating to health and well-being, economic growth and environmental gains is clear; nature and people are part of the same system, provide benefits to each other and the relationship is essential to our future. In the UK we have strong foundations upon which to start rekindling our relationship with the natural world. The Victorian legacy of parks and street trees play an important role in the day-to-day lives of our population. Our iconic countryside is part of the dreams of many people who wish to move away from urban areas for a less hectic lifestyle. But, urbanity is the reality of the 21st century, and bringing nature deeply within our urban centres will need strong leadership. Projects, such as the Big Tree Plant, will contribute significantly to improvements in urban habitats.

Access to high-quality urban parks and green spaces varies hugely throughout the UK. In many deprived areas there may be no open spaces within walking distance, or alternatively, vast areas of open spaces that are effectively green deserts, with no recreation facilities or habitat diversity. Part of this problem is the long-term reductions to parks and countryside funding within local authorities, leading to maintenance of green spaces that is basic.

Amenity green space maintenance involves mowing turfs and cutting hedges, with no scope to holistically manage areas for alternative uses. There is also a need for strong case studies that can be shared across a network of people interested in their green spaces. GreenSpace SE consistently shares best practice and new ideas that aim to achieve higher quality green infrastructure, thus improving benefits for wildlife and people. GreenSpace SE is also struggling to maintain a sustainable funding model. As an infrastructure organisation, an information network hub, but not a delivery charity, we too have difficulty in meeting funding criteria. However, our partnership work and strong network will be a good foundation upon which to start delivery of the Government's objectives.

The Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF), Parks for People programme, has delivered significant amounts of funding for local authorities to improve historic parks and features to the Green Flag Award standard. GreenSpace SE has worked in partnership with HLF to deliver funding surgeries for our network, encouraging greater numbers of applications. However, for many authorities or organisations, with parks that have no historic features but which have significant areas of green spaces within their locale, funding options are limited. Small funding pots, often levered through partnerships with community organisations, have limited impact on the needs and requirements to deliver healthier populations and improved biodiversity in our urban areas. There is a great opportunity, post the 2012 Olympics, to develop a lottery funded landscape programme, without many constraints, that will help local authorities deliver big, ambitious and strategic projects. The sector is desperate for major funding and this is a key opportunity for the government to influence lottery providers to deliver this White Paper's objectives.

GreenSpace SE is working hard to develop the links between health authorities and local parks and countryside services, in recognition of the strong links between health and well-being and green infrastructure. Some excellent projects have been developed, and monitored, exploring access to green spaces and participant health. For example, in Kent, the project Naturally Active, arranged walking and other activities in the countryside, providing free options for GP referrals and opening access to many participants who would otherwise not be able to travel to the sites. The health benefits are clear to the participants, the PCT and the local authority. Despite the success of this project, exceeding its targets and objectives, funding will cease in July 2011 and the programme will close. Through the collaborations of the LNP's and Health and Well-Being Boards, opportunities exist to widen such successful programmes.

GreenSpace SE also supports the education of children, both learning about the natural environment and delivery of curriculum lessons within a natural space. Many reports are focussing on the health of children and young people, with many stating sedentary lifestyles, lack of focus and attention during school and poor knowledge of where their food comes from. Embedding the lessons of sustainability and ES in this young generation and developing wonderment for nature, our children, taught today, will become the business leaders, environmentalists and policy-makers of tomorrow.

The White Paper too, looks to enable the public through a new Green Designation, to protect local green spaces of importance. Again, GreenSpace SE supports this proposal, which coupled with the Community Right to Reclaim Land, will allow local spaces of

importance to be assessed and valued. The White Paper does state that the designation should not impinge on development or investment sites. Neighbourhood Planning, as described in the Localism Bill, will by key to define areas that are suitable for development or that require protection. Clear planning policy, professional knowledge and excellent community engagement is needed to build plans that reflect current and future needs. Many local authorities have already developed Green or Open Space Strategies, through extensive consultation with local people, on green infrastructure in urban areas and identified development sites. Communities need to understand the full scope of reasoning, decisions and future influences that will affect their plans. Such local knowledge required for this task, is currently held by various disciplines across a range of organisations and accessing these resources, for each community developing a Neighbourhood Plan, needs to be simple and fair.

GreenSpace SE is pleased that the Government will continue to support the Green Flag Award (GFA) as the quality standard in parks and open spaces. We, in partnership with BTCV and Keep Britain Tidy, have increased the number of GFA's obtained since administering the scheme; improving and maintaining a high standard across many parks and open spaces. Through our regional network we deliver GFA training for local authorities, town and parish councils and community organisations. We would like the Government to promote wide marketing of the scheme, to the public and land managers, to gain greater understanding of the GFA programme and encourage further participation in future. The GFA scheme has the potential to become an international standard, applicable to a wide variety of open spaces within a green infrastructure network.

GreenSpace SE is ideally placed to become an integral part of the Government's, Green Infrastructure Partnership. With our considerable knowledge and practitioner's network, we have both an ear to the ground, with a great understanding of policy in practice, and the links strategically with national partner organisations. GreenSpace SE can bring a professional and community network of people and organisations that can help shape the future of the UK's green infrastructure.

International and EU Leadership

This White Paper, through its embedding of ES value into national accounting, will provide a strong direction for sustained growth through careful resource management. Europe already has ambitious targets for biodiversity, carbon emissions and other environmental indicators, and reiterating these within the White Paper, firmly shows their importance to UK objectives. As we take national action, particularly regarding economic impact and analysis of ES, GreenSpace SE supports the international intent of the UK to lead the way in research and development programmes in understanding global resource use. Global action and leadership, through collaborative working and negotiation, can help to deliver equitable resource use for all; ensuring developing countries can build new sustainable growth models without reproduction of the mistakes made, and now being tackled, within the developed world. It is vital that the UK Government pushes for international action, not just diplomatic rhetoric. Climate change is a global reality and the UK's consumption of global resources means our stewardship needs to be far-reaching and effective.

Concluding Thoughts

GreenSpace SE, our professional network and community partners, already have a great awareness of the benefits afforded to us by the natural environment. Our charitable aims reflect the desire for everyone to have access to high-quality green infrastructure, with the understanding of the social, economic and environmental gains delivered through parks and open spaces. Protecting, improving and enhancing green infrastructure in the future will be key to managing ES resources, sustaining economic growth and protecting the health and well-being of the UK population.

To effectively deliver the outcomes and objectives highlighted in this White Paper, collaborative working and strategic partnerships can focus efforts and help partners to pool resources. There needs to be some significant funding to realistically deliver the ambitions set in this paper. The impact of the Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) has affected parks and countryside services adversely as non-statutory services. Many local authorities have reduced core-funding to charities and community organisations already delivering environmental volunteering and habitat improvements, reducing their capacity to deliver objectives. The CSR has also reduced core-funding to many national organisations, which are now expected to deliver on these proposals.

This White Paper recommends green infrastructure as important but fails to deliver appropriate funding for a sector that has been continually reduced over decades. As green infrastructure delivers so many cross-cutting objectives, health and well-being, economic growth, ES, climate change adaptation and mitigation, the Government needs to acknowledge the value achieved through investment and the potential for a variety of government departments to provide funding to achieve cross-cutting aims. Investment now in this sector will front-load much of the cost; reducing the cost of implementation required as climate change happens, providing long-term cost savings and future-proofing green spaces for people and wildlife. Retrofitting green roofs, enabling communities to develop new parks and green spaces and planting street trees will provide benefits ranging from stormwater management, air quality, biodiversity, health and well-being, economic growth and community cohesion whilst also educating the public about sustainability, climate change, nature and thoughtful consumption of goods and services.

GreenSpace SE supports this White Paper and applauds its focus on valuing ecosystem services and the natural capital we use in the UK and abroad. Partnership working and collaboration already achieve many great projects that improve our environment. The sector welcomes the opportunity to work more broadly with economic and health partnerships to further strengthen evidence and research regarding green spaces and urban objectives. We call for a review of lottery funders to enable access to vital money to support and deliver projects. In turn, as a sector we will pursue other opportunities to pool resources and lever in private funding to develop, enhance and maintain the natural environment.