

**Regional response to
An invitation to shape the Nature of England – discussion document
Defra July 2010**

Q1. What do we need to do to embed the true value of our natural resources in decision making at all levels?

The benefits of high quality green infrastructure have been well researched. For the individual these include health and well-being, both physically and mentally, reducing the need for medical services. Children and young people benefit hugely from accessible green spaces for play and development. Furthermore older people are regular visitors to parks and green spaces, enabling a greater quality of life and yielding high satisfaction rates with where they live (Natural Thinking Report by Dr William Bird, for the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, 2007).

Benefits to the community include the range of opportunities available for social interaction. Over 7,000 community groups working in 50,000 places deliver environmental improvements for 660,000 local people (Annual Review BTCV 2007-2008). Green infrastructure also delivers environmental benefits through the mitigation and adaptation of urban areas due to climate change.

Central government needs to communicate understanding about the value of ecosystem services to all levels of society; individuals, organisations directly involved in maintaining or improving green infrastructure, and wider departments within government. Our natural resources will be critical in ensuring our communities are sustainable in the future.

a. How can we reflect all the different kinds of value described above?

Valuing the UK landscape, rural and urban, using the ecosystem services approach will provide a benchmark for enhancement and improvement over time. By understanding the true cost provided by green infrastructure it can be properly balanced against development within an economic model. Growth in urban areas can then be designed to enhance the benefits of green infrastructure and, using new technologies and skills, can become exemplar for the future.

2. The discussion document identifies three overarching challenges for the White Paper to consider.

These are:

Climate Change

Demographic Changes

Incremental Impacts

Have we chosen the right challenges to focus on?

These are wide-ranging, expansive categories and, as long as these are tackled through a cross-cutting departmental approach, then GreenSpace South East supports this focus. All three categories will offer opportunities for continued investment and improvement in green infrastructure to deliver benefits for local people; all yielding economic returns on this investment.

2.a) If not, what should we focus on?

Urban populations are increasingly distanced from the natural environment, through a continuing reduction of accessible urban green spaces and semi-natural urban fringe and increasing amounts of

time spent with technology. However, engagement with environmental schemes, from planting bulbs in road verges to wildlife projects or big landscape improvements have great benefits for participants. Health and well-being, environmental or climate change issues and 'quality of life' improvements projects are deliverable in urban green spaces. Engagement in such projects raises people's self-esteem, creates better cohesion within our communities and improves the built environment.

2.b) How should we approach these challenges?

The message needs to be clear and simple; without functioning natural resources quality of life in the UK will be greatly reduced – socially, environmentally and economically. All departments across government need to sign up and fully integrate policies within their own targets and frameworks. Local authorities are ready to respond to the challenges and opportunities of the future.

3. What are the existing policies and practices aimed at protecting England's natural assets that currently work most effectively?

Designations, such as SSSI's or AONB, have been used to successfully protect some of the UK's most important habitat environments. Consideration should be given to new designations in order to protect other types of public green spaces.

3.a) What works less well- what could we stop doing or do differently?

Parks and green space services are non-statutory; however their management contributes towards compliance in a number of other key legislative frameworks including environmental protection, town and country planning, environmental impact assessment, wildlife and countryside, rights of way, listed planning consents, waste management, noise abatement, and disability discrimination.

The Allotments Act 1908 and 1950, is the only dedicated legislation for this particular type of green space, however the many other green space typologies, as outlined in Planning Policy Guidance 17, do not benefit from dedicated legislation to protect them and ensure their provision. The legislation places a duty upon local authorities to provide allotments where demand exists. Beyond this requirement, the most important feature of the legislation is the protection it provides for 'statutory' sites owned by local authorities.

Similar legislation is needed for other types of parks and green spaces to ensure their protection within the planning and development framework. Parks and green spaces, whose loss would severely impact our natural asset bank, should at the very least be considered for enhanced protection and increased resources within the legislative framework.

4. What mechanisms should we focus on to ensure we manage our natural systems more effectively in future?

Collaborative working between local authorities, internally and externally, with other partner organisations and community groups will widen knowledge about the benefits of green infrastructure. GreenSpace South East works with all 74 local authorities, plus town and parish councils and other organisations, throughout our area. Their collective knowledge, talent and skills in delivering well-managed green infrastructure are already apparent and there are many examples of excellent practice in the south east.

The encouragement and development of delivery partnerships, with greater access to skills and knowledge sharing, will provide the benefits that good quality green infrastructure supplies. There are huge opportunities to provide skills training for a new generation to protect our environment. In urban horticulture and food production we can create local food sources; encouraging health benefits and educating urban populations who are increasingly distant from understanding food production. Simultaneously skills training can assist in the mitigation of climate change; through the retrofit of the built environment with green roofs and walls. By creating a new generation with needed construction skills in-roads can be made to reach reduced CO2 targets from existing housing stock. Furthermore such projects will enhance the capability of green infrastructure to deliver biodiversity into our towns and cities.

4.a) How should we define success?

Benchmarked ecosystem services, assigned to green infrastructure, should be monitored over time. National indicator targets for biodiversity and human health, directly attributable to good quality green infrastructure, can be agreed for survey purposes.

4.b) How can we agree on common goals and assess our progress towards them?

Collaborative working between central government departments will extend further, to wider organisations. By opening the national debate, through this consultation exercise, a wide understanding of people's and organisations response to our natural environment will be collated. Continuing these discussions, engaging and educating the public, will help people determine priorities for their environments. Nationally, GreenSpace South East supports indicators based around quality of green infrastructure, biodiversity and quality of life including health and well-being.

5. How best can we reduce our footprint on the natural environment abroad, through the goods, services and products we use?

By ensuring that all products, food or material, are both fair-trade and sustainable at source before import to the UK we can reduce our overseas footprint on the environment and local populations. Adopting these high-standards internationally will encourage other countries to follow the UK's lead.

6. What best practice and innovative approaches to protecting and enhancing our natural environment do you think should be considered as we develop the White Paper?

GreenSpace, GreenSpace South East, Natural England, CABI, Forestry Commission, Environment Agency, Wildlife Trusts, Woodland Trust, BTCV plus many others have a wealth of best practice, case studies, research and policy which deliver protection and enhancement to our natural environment. By sharing and celebrating the activities of our local authorities, partner organisations and communities we can continue to grow this knowledge bank. Innovative ways of working and thinking are being developed all the time. Protecting the information network and its capacity to respond to future change, will deliver best practice guidance to those managing natural assets.

7. How best can we harness and build on public enthusiasm for the natural environment so people can help improve it through local action, as informed consumers or by shaping policy?

Each of the 50,000+ projects surveyed in the BTCV Annual 2007-2008 report is unique in its delivery, partnerships and benefits for the individuals, communities and places involved. Investment in the skills and training to deliver high quality multi-functional landscapes, for professionals and the

public, will benefit those participating plus their wider community. Positive environmental projects, involving local authorities, partner organisations and community groups, are often the catalyst for wider social improvements particularly in deprived neighbourhoods.

Engagement with green infrastructure promotes wider knowledge of the challenges faced by society in future. Through education and involvement in environmental projects participants feel empowered and able to communicate their desires for wider built environment improvements. Greater participation in the planning and delivery of regeneration projects or town and city improvements can be achieved through supporting community projects at grassroots level.

8. What should be our vision for the role of Civil Society in managing and enhancing the natural environment and for engaging individuals, businesses and communities in setting the agenda for that work?

GreenSpace South East supports the dissemination of skills and knowledge by existing professionals to voluntary and community organisations through partnership working. By ensuring enthusiastic participants who understand the benefits of green infrastructure sit at all decision-making levels, ideas can translate to action. Use the many facets of green infrastructure and the wide opportunities for engagement, by virtue of its cross-cutting benefits, to encourage sustainable growth and enhanced quality of life.

The ecosystem services approach will allow a wide understanding of the economic value assigned to green infrastructure, adding to the existing evidence base. By using this information individuals, businesses and communities can focus resources to deliver the greatest benefits depending on their specific requirements.

9. How best can Government incentivise innovative and effective action on the natural environment, across England, at the local level?

Maintaining and growing a national network of quality green spaces is already being delivered through the Green Flag Award standard. The community award is being achieved by more community organisations year on year. Encouraging participation in this national standard allows groups to learn, share and improve green spaces for local needs throughout the UK.

9.a) How best can local government and other local partners work together to improve local outcomes on the natural environment, and pursue a more integrated approach linking a healthy natural environment to economic prosperity, sustainable development and a better quality of life, health and wellbeing?

Local authorities and partner organisations already engage a wide range of community and voluntary organisations in the management and improvement of green spaces. By preserving and encouraging knowledge networks projects, ideas and innovations can be shared. A national debate, setting out future scenarios and benefits of the natural environment, will provide opportunities for dialogue and action between local authorities and their communities in the development and future growth of their towns and cities.

The integration of policy and decision-making across disciplines needs to take place at all levels of governance; with central government leading the way. For example, there are great opportunities for the health service to invest in green infrastructure to deliver preventative health benefits, such as reducing the obesity rate through greater access to recreation and sports provision or, limiting stress or anxiety in urban populations by a general greening of the built environment.

9.b) What are the most effective mechanisms for managing the natural environment where cross-boundary issues are involved, and making the link to others mechanisms for economic growth, transport and planning?

Inter-disciplinary partnerships can be the most effective to deliver sustainable growth across professional and administrative boundaries. Ensuring that skilled professionals have access to the latest information and guidance from their peers will enable the UK to meet its targets for sustainable growth. Sharing this knowledge between disciplines from across the built environment, and making this knowledge accessible and available to non-professionals, will be key to future development.

9.c) How best can the value of the natural environment be considered within local planning?

Planning policy urgently needs to recognise the importance of green spaces to the sustainability of the whole town or city. New developments should be exemplar in their sustainable credentials; from the buildings to the interconnectedness of the site to its context. Local authorities should have greater powers to decide the best use of planning gains for their green infrastructure; often contributions are arbitrarily assigned to immediate spaces when in context benefits might be better served in other parts of the green infrastructure network. By allowing this, local authorities can engage their communities in forward planning their whole green space network.

10. How best could the economy reflect the true value of nature's services in the way business is done, to drive smarter, green growth?

Understanding ecosystem services, and therefore the resources used across business, will provide a new assessment for costing and valuation of services and goods. By moving towards a resource based economic model, as promoted by the New Economics Foundation and others, the UK can ensure sustainable growth. With new technology and smarter cities there are great opportunities for business to respond and adapt in future; new markets in green technologies and adaptive climate change solutions can be at the forefront of future business and industry.

Micro-business and enterprise will also be encouraged through investment in green infrastructure. Education centres, learning and community centres and heritage attractions, led by local people in partnership with others, can generate income and provide richness to places. The diversity, history and future of the UK can be celebrated through such initiatives.

11. Responsible businesses are already looking for ways to reduce their impact on the environment. How can we encourage more action like this?

Environmental responsibility should be shown to prove an effective marketing and promotional tool. Efficiencies, such as retrofitting office buildings and reducing energy loads, or partnerships which can reduce waste reusing by-product, make savings for business. Incentives, such as tax benefits, might be encouraged to speed up responsible actions.

As local people are engaged and educated in the wider environmental conditions, through engagement with their local green spaces, they will subsequently become empowered to become 'informed consumers'. Demand for environmental responsibility will be grown through engagement.

12. What are the barriers to joining-up and seeking multiple benefits from our natural assets?

Loss of resources within the parks and green space sector following the expected 25% budget loss across local government will put further pressures on staff, which may make creating effective partnerships difficult. There will be further pressure for green space managers to consider ways of generating more income, within the context of reduced resourcing.

Green space quality standards are likely to reduce over time, as managers seek austerity measures for example reducing mowing regimes, and bedding planting which will greatly impact the quality of local places. Such pressures will impact on services ability to assess alternative delivery methods, such as externalising services to private sector providers, developing social enterprises and devolving service delivery to the voluntary and community sectors and developing commissioning across service boundaries and service areas such as health.

13. What are the barriers to thinking big and taking a landscape scale approach to managing our natural assets?

A development approach of landscape scale may cover large areas and include projects to cover a wide range of issues including agriculture, biodiversity and the local economy. The barriers to his approach include:

- Loss of capital funding from government departments
- Changes within local authority governance to respond to budgetary pressures impacting the ability to develop new projects
- Loss of confidence following the recent loss of support for existing projects e.g. London Thames Gateway Development Corporation, Olympic park legacy company
- Lack of existing baseline evidence to support new landscape scale bids

14. What should be the priorities for the UK's role in EU and international action, to protect and enhance the natural environment at home and abroad?

The network of local authorities, community groups, voluntary and charitable organisations that already manage and improve our green spaces need to be protected. By using the talent, knowledge, enthusiasm and expertise from those who undertake environmental projects wider civil society will be engaged; wide benefits for society can be achieved personally, locally and nationally.

15. And finally, if you could choose just one priority action for the Natural Environment White Paper to drive forward locally, nationally or internationally – what would it be?

Recognition that high quality green infrastructure, connected landscape through to urban centres, is essential in maintaining quality of life for the people in the UK. Through new and existing partnerships between local authorities, community groups and business people sustainable urban growth will be possible. Including high-quality green infrastructure to attract inward investment, create healthy populations and improve ecosystem services provision should be the priority.