

An invitation to shape the nature of England

Defra discussion document, October 2010

Response of the Landscape Institute

Introduction

The Landscape Institute (LI) is an educational charity and chartered body responsible for promoting the protection, conservation and enhancement of the natural and built environment for the benefit of the public. It champions well-designed and well-managed urban and rural landscape. Our accreditation and professional procedures ensure that the designers, managers and scientists who make up the landscape architecture profession work to the highest standards. Its advocacy and education programmes promote the landscape architecture profession as one which focuses on design, environment and community in order to inspire great places where people want to live, work and visit. We welcome the overarching approach promoted in the discussion document for a need to grow and enhance the value of a healthy natural environment as opposed to simply limiting the damage inflicted upon it by society.

We believe, as will become clear in our answers below, that a green infrastructure approach to land use planning, design and management is critical to the successful enhancement of a healthy natural environment. It is one that delivers a range of social, environmental and economic benefits through its multifunctional and connected nature. Our position statement¹ on the subject defines green infrastructure as:

“The network of green spaces and other natural elements such as rivers and lakes that are interspersed between and connect villages, towns and cities”

In recent days we have been concerned that government policy documents seem to be undermining this definition which, in recent years, has become increasingly well understood. Both the Treasury's *National Infrastructure Plan* and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills' White Paper, *Local growth: realising every place's potential* use the term to describe 'environmentally friendly' infrastructure such as offshore wind farms.

However, *An invitation to shape the nature of England* defines green infrastructure in a similar way to our position statement and this is an approach we welcome. It is a definition which sits comfortably with others that are widely accepted, such as those from Natural England² and the Forestry Commission³. It is crucial that Government departments are clear about important concepts such as these and we urge Defra to both retain its definition of green infrastructure and ensure that this correct term if communicated to, and adopted by, other Departments.

Question 1

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

Assessing the impact of decision making on natural systems and resources first

The value of our natural resources will only become truly embedded in decision-making processes by ensuring that all strategies, policies and proposals at every level, including national and local Government, are **first** assessed against their potential impacts on natural systems and resources, and then **only progressed** if and when positive environmental gains have been fully integrated into the proposals. Until this is achieved the perceived 'need' for economic development will continue to overrule cumulative harm in terms of environmental degradation. We recognise that achieving this represents a significant challenge; nonetheless there is a real benefit and need, as highlighted in the discussion document, for Government and wider society to integrate the true value of the natural environment into decision making. Therefore there must be real consensus between various Government departments (particularly Communities and Local Government and the Treasury), local government and Civil Society, that this is an ideal worth pursuing and the appropriate mechanisms put in place to ensure that the ambition is realised.

¹ Landscape Institute (2009) Green infrastructure: connected and multifunctional landscapes, Landscape Institute

² <http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/ourwork/planningtransportlocalgov/greeninfrastructure/default.aspx>

³ <http://www.forestry.gov.uk/forestry/INFD-79EK7F>

Ecosystems services

However, the subjective nature of the term value complicates further the already difficult task of integrating the true value of the natural environment into decision making at all levels, and will prove a significant challenge for the government, local authorities and civil society. An ecosystems services valuation approach, as outlined in Defra's 2007 publication⁴, is perhaps one of the best methods of establishing the value of our natural resources in monetary terms, but is one that is complex and not easily understood outside of scientific/academic circles.

Relevant sources of evidence relating to the natural environment and the ecosystems services it provides should be identified at a national level. The outcomes of the extremely promising UK National Ecosystems Assessment may be relevant here. This evidence should be used or applied locally, to better inform local decision-making. Gaps in the evidence base should be identified and relevant research commissioned at a national level to further support this. Some of the benefits of such research may well accrue to commercial organisations, either directly or indirectly, for example by promoting new sustainable technologies or markets or reducing whole-life costs. There should therefore be potential to attract sponsorship from the private sector rather than research being entirely at public cost. Government departments such as Defra and CLG will have an important enabling and communications role in providing direction to and endorsement of appropriate evidence sources.

Contextualising natural value for different decision makers

The concept of the 'true value' of natural resources is high-level and would perhaps be more accessible, and therefore more successfully embedded in decision making, if it was communicated in a more practicable manner. Explaining the value of natural resources to different types of decision-makers (commercial developers, government policy makers, charities etc) in a way which resonates with their core objectives (monetary gains, social benefit etc) would perhaps be one way of embedding this value into decision making. One example of this is a piece of policy and advocacy work the LI is already undertaking with a forthcoming publication (January 2011) on the subject of the economic value of landscape. This aims to convince commercial developers of the real nature of landscape in the development and place-making process and highlights some of the savings to be made through, for example, retention of existing natural site features.

On a cautionary note however, the LI does have concerns that the discussion document appears to place financial value somewhat above other, equally important, values. Assessment of the financial value of individual resources can be persuasive in most cases, but could also be used as an argument against their retention if they are deemed to be less 'valuable' in cash terms. 'Innate' values must always be factored in to any resource evaluation.

The planning system

The planning system has a significant impact upon the way in which decisions are made about the use of our natural resources. It already provides a regulatory mechanism for most forms of development and is likely to continue to do so, within the more streamlined and simpler, locally-focussed reform that is currently proposed. The National Planning Framework and its supporting statements or guidance should make explicit reference to the value of the natural environment, the often intangible services that it provides for the benefit of all, and the need not only to consider any adverse impact on these but the opportunities to enhance or exploit these effectively. Development proposals should be tested against these impacts, whether negative or positive.

If green infrastructure (GI) was fully integrated into the planning system, it would provide a mechanism for ensuring that the natural environment, and its inherent value, was better integrated into our approaches to land use management. A key part of this is the effective communication of GI as a sustainable approach to multiple service provision, rather than being confused with conventional green space.

⁴ Defra (2007), An introductory guide to valuing ecosystem services, Defra

Question 2

Have we identified the right overarching challenges for the White Paper to consider?

The discussion paper identifies climate change, demographic changes and incremental impacts as the three overarching challenges for the White Paper to consider. We agree that these are the right overarching challenges for the white paper to consider.

Question 2a

If not, what should we focus on?

We recommend that Government also considers land use, and in particular finite land and competing demands, as an overarching challenge within the final white paper. Land use has already been the subject of a recent Foresight project⁵. Land Use Futures seeks to identify what could be done in the future to use and manage land more sustainably while at the same time unlock greater value for people and the economy. The report highlights multifunctionality as a key tool to overcoming the land use challenge, and we believe that green infrastructure is an approach to land use planning, design and management which will deliver truly multifunctional landscapes.

Question 3

What are the existing policies and practices aimed at protecting England's natural assets (including but not limited to those set out above on our biodiversity, seas, water bodies, air and soil) that currently work most effectively?

National, regional⁶ and sub-regional mechanisms such as the EU Water Framework Directive, River Basin Management Plans, Water Catchment Management Plans are essential as individual local authorities have too narrow a remit and are politically unsuited to working collaboratively over a wider area, as is often necessary when dealing with natural systems. Up until the recent change of Government, regional spatial strategies provided extremely useful mechanisms for the planning and delivery of green infrastructure.

In addition to these, designations such as SSSI's and Local Nature Reserves have worked reasonably well under existing planning policy. Nature conservation policies underpinned by European legislation through the Habitats Directive and the UK Wildlife and Countryside and Rights of Way Acts provide vital protection for threatened landscapes?

Question 3a

What works less well – what could we stop doing or do differently?

Most legislation and directives are perceived as restrictive and therefore built around the notion of stopping things happening because of the landscape quality or features or need for conservation. We recognise the need and opportunity to frame the protection of natural assets in the context of opportunity and change through development which itself can benefit from their preservation, or incorporation.

Strategic Environment Assessment (SEA), Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA) and Sustainability Appraisals (SA) seem to be too complex and confusing for decision makers to understand, with most of the professional and technical guidance using jargon and acronyms that make the information inaccessible to most people. With the new Government localism agenda proposing to devolve more power to local communities, this may well pose an even greater problem in the future.

Legislation aimed at repairing environmental damage has been less effective. For example, with regards the Environmental Protection Act, the Government has given more and more responsibility to local authorities without supplying the means for them to honour those obligations. Local authorities have to bid for funding which is very difficult to obtain and requires a large amount of preparatory work yet they do not have the resources or skills to conduct this work.

⁵ Government Office for Science (2009) Land Use Futures: making the most of land in the 21st century, Foresight

⁶ The Landscape Institute is fully aware of recent proposals to change the planning system and the loss of regional planning

With regards soils, there is the widely held view that the UK already has enough legislation and guidance to protect soils. However, erosion and the widespread contamination of soils could be dealt with more actively and effectively. For example, industry and farming practices continue to have a detrimental impact on soils and there seems to be few incentives to solve the problems.

Question 4

What mechanisms should we focus on to ensure we manage our natural systems more effectively?

The European Landscape Convention, of which the UK Government is a signatory state, potentially has a useful role to play in reconciling human and natural systems into the world provide a useful mechanism for integration of natural and human processes in the planning, design, protection and management of landscapes. As a treaty of the Council of Europe it does not have the 'teeth' of EU directives but greater application of some of its key principles within any reforms to the planning system would, we believe, lead to more effective management of our natural systems.

As we have stated elsewhere, green infrastructure (GI) should feature prominently within the new National Planning Framework in order to ensure we manage natural systems more effectively.

Government needs to decide where the application of regulatory enforcement is required to ensure a high level of compliance and where incentives may be more acceptable and potentially effective in achieving desired result or changes. Changing of attitudes, opinions and priorities may be better effected through influential third parties than by government decree.

Question 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?

Green infrastructure (GI) only seems to be mentioned once or twice in the discussion paper. Defra may choose to use a different expression, as the term is barely understood by most people. However, the general approach of planning, protecting, delivering, enhancing and managing networks of green spaces and other natural elements within and between our towns, cities and villages, offers the best, possibly the only, opportunity to protect and enhance our natural environment.

Question 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?

The LI has taken the Cabinet office definition of "Civil Society" in its description of Nick Hurd's appointment as the Minister for Civil Society, namely charities, social enterprises and voluntary organisations in compiling our response. This does however encompass a broad church of organisations, including our own and other professional institutes.

We believe it is a given that people benefit from the wide range of enhancements that can be made to the natural environment. Our experience through the work of our members points always to end users and the public once again becoming aware of the value and benefit that environmental enhancement works provides. Educating civil society to recognise these benefits will deliver political imperative) and prioritise the environment agenda.

We do believe the professional institutes, part of the Civil Society, have a role to play. For the LI's part (and many other professional institutes) we have a branch system which provides a locally responsive group for local matters; but we also have member-led committees to address policy and technical and educational matters.

We can provide case studies of appropriate examples where civil society has had a role in environmental enhancement and management. In fact our policy committee is currently working on an additional resource for

our green infrastructure position statement that sets out examples of locally delivered green infrastructure enhancement projects.

Fundamentally, we think it is right that Civil Society should have a role in managing and enhancing the natural environment. This involvement has profound and significant knock-on positive benefits to health, feeling safe, quality of place, climate change adaptation and mitigation, education, economic viability and social cohesion.

In terms of setting the agenda for this work, we feel it needs to be undertaken under the umbrella of some overall plan. This might be Biodiversity Action Plans, action plans from GI strategies or district wide open space strategies, or Local Strategic Partnership-led (LSP) initiatives. This may vary from place to place, but expeditious communication between all the possible delivery partners is essential so people and organisations know what is going on, but can focus time and resources on delivery for the natural environment (rather than attending meetings).

There is also a big role for community planning, often supported by Civil Society organisations such as community councils leading parish plans and village design statements. We are aware of examples of these that are very much focused on environmental enhancement in the community aspirations. Delivery is always more of a challenge. Setting the agenda for the work will require consultative approaches with existing networks not new organisations. There are various charities such as BTCV and Groundwork already undertaking work of this sort and it will be important to consider their views and roles, rather than reinventing delivery mechanisms.

We also see Non-Government Organisations (NGO's) such as the Wildlife Trusts, Community Forests and the Woodland Trust that already exist playing an important role. These organisations could be better supported and developed to help engage individuals and businesses. The Land Restoration Trust and local authorities should also play a significant role. Although we recognise that where there are not any statutory duties (or even where there are), natural environment issues may well be matters for devolution or transfer to town and parish councils and other bodies such as community interest companies set up to undertake such work.

Schools would also be a good place to start, but a local organisation will need to be identified to promote, monitor and publicise the work with schools. Such an organisation would need adequate support. This work could be done by local authorities or other publicly orientated or community based organisations.

We think the vision should extend to all members of society as there are many different tasks which can be carried out by active and less active Civil Society members as well as, for example, offenders and prisoners. The vision could be very simple measurable community initiatives such as everyone in every community can tell you about at least one thing which they have done or benefited from, this year, to enhance the natural environment.

We do have some concerns and these lie in assumptions that the leadership will be provided by volunteers. This is a very risky strategy as often the success of these projects relies on charismatic leadership of one person (or a couple of people). Succession planning is often impossible and volunteers can simply leave with no ongoing commitment.

We are also concerned about the potential for conflicts of interest to come in to play for example, the community interest company or charity that gets funding from a local company, that subsequently wants to gain planning permission for development that might have an overall negative effect on the environment, can lead to unreasonable bias or pressure with loyalties being divided.

We are concerned about the potential that the localism agenda will have on fragmentation, which is of course bad for biodiversity and the potential for areas to act as corridors etc. We are aware of local authorities that are planning to transfer responsibility for ponds and ditches to parish councils. Unless there is a clear strategy for what this transferred responsibility means, what work is required and what conservation is necessary, these local transfers could be detrimental rather than enhance the natural environment.

Question 9

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

Firstly the LI would question why it is only innovative work to be incentivised. Why should innovative action be considered better than established practice which works and has a track record?

In terms of incentivisation at a local level we have some thoughts as follows:

- Allocate funds for community-led projects through easily understood grant funding schemes with simple application processes. This seems to be in line with what Nick Hurd is advocating. In our experience it can be off-putting for voluntary organisations that have been set up because of a passion for the natural environment to have complicated application and monitoring processes in order to secure funding;
- Pay revenue for maintenance and management as well as capital for projects;
- Ensure the importance of the natural environment and the role the communities might play is embedded in community strategies, so that LSPs have mechanisms for supporting activity;
- Encourage green infrastructure strategic work (say at LEP scale) to include local delivery options as part of the planning;
- Provide tax incentives related to the value of 'green action';
- Maintain a statutory requirement for open space audits (currently under PPG 17) to be undertaken and extend that requirement to include habitat/biodiversity audits with the presumption that nature conservation strategies and open space strategies are essential tools for planning and co-ordinating the local involvement; and
- Ensure that advocacy is in simple, plain English (and other languages as required).

We think this issue is about publicity as well as incentivisation; publicising innovative action and good work which is not necessarily innovative. Site visits by prominent individuals who support the green agenda – not necessarily politicians.

Question 9a

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?

We would add "quality of place" or "well designed" to the list. There is no point in funding natural environment improvements which do not meet the needs of the local people and are then not looked after. We recognise the benefits of re-engaging of people with nature can only be achieved through the delivery of high quality solutions which invite social functions and use through being safe and accessible for use. It is the addressing of the safe and social aspects of the landscape (particularly in the urban context) which triggers a better quality of life and sense of well being.

A landscape-scale approach needs to be adopted. Local authority boundaries do not correspond with natural environmental boundaries. This would be compromised if, for instance, local community-led biodiversity projects proceeded without due regard for the wider ecological context. Partnership work already takes place and should continue to be encouraged.

LEPs and local authorities have to plan their green infrastructure and open space strategies as cross-cutting in order to deliver a more integrated approach. This is the place where the dialogue should start. Strategies of course need evidence, but they should be written in a clear 'we will' style, so it is obvious to anyone what the intention is.

The planning system currently provides a framework for this integrated approach to happen. But not all local planning authorities have the in-house expertise to handle the strategic and development control aspects of how the integrated approach can be delivered. This requires sound policies in local plans and awareness and commitment to challenge and negotiate at planning application stages. In this regard, design review panels

⁷(which usually have landscape and sustainability expertise on board) can assist on larger applications to support the local authority. Enabling support, especially for the more strategic work has also been seen to be effective and should be continued.

Question 9b

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

A 'larger-than-local' approach, supported by local partners, needs to be adopted. The loss of regional planning in recent months means that mechanisms need to be put in place to ensure that cross-boundary working still takes place. This void could be filled through the proposed Local Enterprise Partnerships, reinforcing the important role that the natural environment has to play in terms of regeneration, economic growth and stability. However, with their geography based on economics, problems could easily arise where natural systems need to be considered and managed within different geographical contexts.

A Duty to Cooperate between local authorities where the natural environment is concerned might be a useful way forward, based on physical geography rather than political boundaries.

Question 9c

How best can the value of the natural environment be considered within local planning?

The value of the natural environment would be best integrated within local planning by identifying and adopting integrated green infrastructure (GI) networks connected across all local authority areas, where environmental protection and enhancement action will be focused. As we stated earlier (Question 6), the general approach of establishing, protecting, managing and creating networks of green spaces that connect farmland, recreation spaces, wildlife habitats, water courses, woodland, coasts, hill and valley landscapes and other open spaces in towns and in the countryside, including domestic gardens, offers the best, possibly the only, opportunity to promote greater awareness and understanding of the inter-connected natural resources that we depend on.

These GI networks should be created and maintained by means of local planning policies and connected at a sub-regional level across adjoining authority areas. They should include areas which have an existing value or use as a natural resource, and other areas that could provide new physical connections between natural assets, even though these may have little intrinsic value when assessed in isolation. In this way connected networks of large and small areas of land, where a healthy and sustainable natural environment will be conserved and enhanced, can be established. However, their protection from inappropriate development should not be allowed to provide an opportunity for local communities to resist essential development and economic growth. GI can and should be incorporated into all new developments, particularly where new environmental linkages can be provided by means of cycle routes, footpaths and planting along property boundaries.

Every local authority, urban and rural, should be making a contribution to GI and demonstrating a proper understanding of the principle i.e. that this is not synonymous with green space. The assets of green space should not only include publicly owned land and they should clearly be multifunctional in their actual and/or potential provision of services. They should complement and relate to green infrastructure provision in adjoining authority areas, thus delivering a network.

Local authorities should be required to produce detailed GI maps, using GIS with associated metadata, and relevant policies within an agreed timescale and to include these as part of their local development frameworks or other successor local planning document. The maps and policies should be subject to regular review.

⁷Landscape Institute, RTPI, RIBA, CABI (2009) Design review principles and practice, CABI

Question 12

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

There is no legal requirement to be joined up. Different agendas and compromise can reduce the benefits to be gained from the natural environment. This is why multi-disciplinary teams needs to be at the heart of any decision-making process.

Question 13

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

The main barriers to landscape-scale approaches to the management of natural assets include:

- The loss of a planning or any other system operating at the 'larger-than-local' level in relation to landscape;
- A lack of valuation systems which can be incorporated into financial evaluations and sustainable decision making. The whole life cost of plans and projects, including future mitigation measures and the value of lost assets, should be taken into account and there are precedents for this in mineral and waste planning that can be applied in principle more widely.
- Access to expertise and information will be a barrier to local provision of strategic planning for the natural environment, best use of natural resources and development of green infrastructure. Bodies such as CABI Space, Natural England, the Forestry Commission and the Environment Agency potentially have vital roles to play in providing high quality resources and the benefits of experience and overview to local authorities or smaller bodies that will not be able to accommodate the necessary resources in-house.
- The narrow focus and artificial, politically-based boundaries of local authorities generally bear little relationship to the landscape or geography that is fundamental to natural assets, systems and processes. To realise the actual and potential value of the natural environment, it will be essential for local authorities and other relevant organisations to work together, probably under a formal duty to cooperate, based on physical geography rather than economic or political history.

Question 15

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?

Green infrastructure (GI) should be fully defined, in terms that are easily understood, adequately explained and (see LI's publication⁸ on the subject) integrated within the Government's proposed National Planning Framework. The Government should progress primary legislation as necessary, to require Green Infrastructure strategies and policies to be incorporated into all Local Plans, Local Development Framework documents, Growth Area Strategies, Sustainable Community Strategies and Local Enterprise Partnership economic and planning strategies, without exception, and as a mandatory requirement for all medium/large scale planning applications.

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⁸ Landscape Institute (2009) Green infrastructure: connected and multifunctional landscapes, Landscape Institute