

Bob Neill MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the Department for Communities and Local Government

Speech at the Green Infrastructure Partnership launch, 11 October 2011

Introduction

[Personal reference to previous site visit]

I am glad to be here to be able to say a few words as the Minister from the Department that covers planning and sustainable development. The Green Infrastructure Partnership will have an important role to play in helping to realise the Government's ambition to be the greenest ever.

Importance of the partnership

The partnership needs to provide strategic direction and support to local areas to make the most of our existing green infrastructure, as well as to support green infrastructure development.

I need to emphasise that the Government is coming from a position that economic growth and the natural environment should be mutually compatible. High quality natural environments and green spaces foster healthy neighbourhoods and lifestyles, and encourage social integration and enterprise. Economic growth and quality green spaces are not separate entities – they work together. Quality green space increases property values, attracts business and increases local prosperity generally for the people who live near them.

Natural Environment White Paper commitment: Local Green Space designation

Green spaces are incredibly important to local life which is why Government is committed to protecting them. They play a huge part in people's lives and bring communities together – perhaps too often something we take for granted, but they are very much 'assets of community value' that we talk about in the Localism Bill.

As well as the Natural Environment White Paper's commitment to establish this partnership – it also committed us to consult on a new Local Green Space designation to protect locally significant green areas which are special to local communities. Local people will be able to use the new designation in their local and neighbourhood plans.

Planning has a key role in securing a sustainable future. Promoting economic growth and protecting our natural environment and valued green spaces go hand-in-hand and are two of the main ambitions of our planning reforms. This is why, when the new designation is used in neighbourhood and local plans, we will expect it to be used in a way that complements - and does not undermine - investment in homes, jobs and other essential services. Given the importance of green spaces to the health and happiness of local communities, we are clear

that the new designation should offer suitably strong protection to localised areas that are demonstrably special, and we are consulting on that basis.

National Planning Policy Framework

We are currently consulting on the planning policy for the new Local Green Space designation as part of our consultation on the National Planning Policy Framework. We've whittled down all national planning policies into one concise document. By cutting over 1000 pages to just over fifty we are creating a simpler, swifter system that everybody can understand without needing to pay for expensive lawyers.

You will be aware that the consultation process on the National Planning Policy Framework has thrown up a number of highly publicised concerns. It is worth me therefore taking this opportunity to dispel some of the myths around the framework. It is a consultation at this stage in order to hear views from all, so it can be improved. It has been claimed that the government is putting the countryside and valued green space in peril. That doomsday scenario is way off beam. The idea that growth will be able to take place wherever, whenever and however is false. This is not any old development, anywhere. It will be up to councils, working together with their local communities, to determine the right level and location for development, based on a careful assessment of needs and the local and natural environment.

The Prime Minister himself referring to the Framework in a letter to the National Trust – stated *"I have always believed that our beautiful British landscape is a national treasure. We should cherish and protect it for everyone's benefit."* The problem lies with the current system which is costly and bureaucratic with excessive central control, preventing local communities from shaping development in their neighbourhoods. We need a more strategic and integrated approach to planning for nature and green space within and across local areas, one that guides development to the best locations, encourages greener design and enables development to enhance natural networks for the benefit of people and the environment as part of sustainable development.

The duty to cooperate which we are introducing in the Localism Bill will require councils and other public bodies to work together on an ongoing basis when they are preparing local plans in relation to strategic cross boundary issues. The new Planning Framework defines the strategic priorities on which we expect councils to cooperate which include climate change and adaptation, protection and enhancement of the natural and historic environment. Rather than imposing targets or blueprints from above, this Government is changing things so local people and their councils decide for themselves where to locate development and how they want their local area to grow. Development will need to be sustainable and not in breach of the Framework's environmental protections.

Protections for the green belt, for National Parks, historic environment and Areas of Outstanding National Beauty continue and precisely why we need clear national policy. It insists on high environmental standards and good design. Poorly-designed and poorly-located development is in no-one's interest. At its heart is a statement of powerful simplicity: if a proposed development, or plan, does not give rise to any problems and the community approve it then it should go ahead without delay - a presumption in favour of sustainable

development. The Framework provides communities with the tools they need to achieve an improved and healthy natural environment as part of sustainable growth, taking account of the objectives set out in the Natural Environment White Paper.

I, like Greg Clark my Ministerial colleague who has lead responsibility on planning reforms, am confident that the proposals set out in the Framework - with the principles of the Natural Environment White Paper - provide a real opportunity to bring about real changes to support the natural environment, encourage sustainable growth and increase the power of local people and communities. The consultation for the new Planning Framework ends next Monday on 17 October 2011 – if you have not already commented then I impress upon you and your organisations to do so.

Concluding comments on the Partnership

Finally, I welcome the Landscape Institute's publication and the eight case studies it highlights. A clear message from the examples is how vital green infrastructure is where it has been effectively integrated into where and how we live – helping to underpin our growth ambitions, by attracting investment and helping to ensure new houses and business premises are socially, economically and environmentally sustainable. Expert bodies such as the Landscape Institute, RTPI and TCPA and networks of green space at the local level will have an important role in advising and equipping planners on how to integrate the natural environment into urban and residential areas to meet the challenges of growth, climate change and environment deprivation.

The Green Infrastructure Partnership we are here to launch today will be a key player in helping to develop the full potential of England's green infrastructure and to demonstrate the social, economic and environmental benefits that green infrastructure can provide. Sustainable development must go hand in hand with protecting and making the best use of our valuable green spaces and rural corridors. Thank you.

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