

Environment Food and Rural Affairs Committee Inquiry: Natural Environment White Paper

Response of the Landscape Institute, 26 September 2011

1. The Landscape Institute

The Landscape Institute is the Royal Chartered body for landscape architects. As a professional organisation and educational charity, we work to protect, conserve and enhance the natural and built environment for the public benefit. We accredit university courses and promote professional development to ensure that landscape architects deliver the highest standards of practice. We work with government to improve the planning, design and management of urban and rural landscape. Through our advocacy programmes and support to our members we champion landscape, and the landscape profession, in order to inspire great places where people want to live, work and visit.

The LI's membership currently stands at approximately 6000 landscape planners, designers, managers and scientists, all of whom have an interest in both the intrinsic value of nature as well as the economic and social benefits to be gained through the protection and enhancement of ecosystem services. The LI believes that a green infrastructure approach to land use planning, design and management is central to securing both of these while at the same time reconnecting people with nature.

The LI welcomes much of the thinking in the Natural Environment White Paper (NEWP), including many of the commitments on green infrastructure. In particular we are delighted to have been able to work with Defra in shaping the Green Infrastructure Partnership in recent months. We look forward to the launch of this exciting commitment and the concurrent launch of our new guide *Local Green Infrastructure: helping communities make the most of their landscape*¹, scheduled to take place on 11 October 2011.

2. Summary

- Much of the progressive thinking contained within NEWP relies upon a planning system which puts the natural environment at the heart of decision-making in relation to the built environment. The current reforms of the planning system will fail to do this.
- The LI supports the NEWP commitment to integrate green infrastructure into the planning system. The only way to achieve this is to ensure that it is fully integrated into the Government's planning reforms.
- Green infrastructure should be at the heart of local plans.

¹ Local green infrastructure: *helping communities make the most of their landscape*, Landscape Institute 2011

3. What actions are required across Government departments, from local government and by civil society to deliver the White Paper's proposals to grow a green economy and reconnect people with nature?

3.1. Government departments

It is important to have across government an agreed definition of green infrastructure. The LI supports the definition used in NEWP, although we would recommend including specific reference to multifunctionality. In its 2009 publication² *Green Infrastructure: Connected and Multi-functional Landscapes*, LI 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". This is a definition which sits comfortably with those commonly used by Natural England³ and the Forestry Commission⁴. In recent months however, other areas of Government have been using the term in very different way, for example, 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 physical infrastructure such as offshore wind farms.

It is essential that there is greater 'joined up thinking' between Government departments. There is a real benefit and need for Government departments to integrate the true value of the natural environment into its decision-making. There should therefore be a consensus between Defra, CLG and the Treasury, local government and civil society in addressing these issues. The complete failure to coordinate work across departments is illustrated by the current approach to planning reform.

Much of the progressive thinking contained within NEWP relies upon a planning system which puts the natural environment at the heart of decision-making in relation to the built development. The current reforms of the planning system, as outlined in the draft NPPF, will fail to do this, despite Government advocating this approach in NEWP and the rich evidence base contained within the UK National Ecosystems Assessment.

The Natural Environment White Paper states: *"The Government wants this to be the first generation to leave the natural environment of England in a better state than it inherited. To achieve so much means taking action across sectors rather than treating environmental concerns in isolation. It requires us all to put the value of nature at the heart of our decision-making – in Government, local communities and businesses."*

– paragraph 2, page 3, NEWP

"Through reforms of the planning system, we will take a strategic approach to planning for nature within and across local areas. This approach will guide development to the best locations, encourage greener design and enable development to enhance natural networks. We will retain

² Green infrastructure: connected and multifunctional landscapes, Landscape Institute, 2009

³ www.naturalengland.org.uk/ourwork/planningtransportlocalgov/greeninfrastructure/default.aspx

⁴ www.forestry.gov.uk/forestry/INFD-79EK7F

the protection and improvement of the natural environment as core objectives of the planning system.” – paragraph 6, page 3, NEWP

None of the approaches outlined in NEWP is reflected in the draft NPPF. The draft NPPF does not explain how the environmental, social and economic objectives for the planning system relate to each other. Moreover, CLG has announced that current national guidance contained in Planning Policy Statements, including PPS9: Biodiversity and Geological Conservation, will be abolished. It is difficult to understand how the vision outlined above can be translated into action with an approach to planning which favours economic growth over the natural environment. The draft NPPF does not appear to take account of any of the objectives set out in NEWP, particularly in relation to placing nature at the heart of economic decision-making. Instead, it treats economic growth and environmental protection as separate goals rather than accepting that they are interlocking aspects of the same process.

Unless and until development proposals at every level are first assessed against their potential impact on natural systems and resources, and then only progressed if and when positive environmental gains have been fully integrated into the proposals, the perceived need for economic development will continue to overrule cumulative harm in terms of environmental degradation.

The LI supports the NEWP commitment to integrate green infrastructure into the planning system. The only way to achieve this is to ensure that it is fully integrated into the Government's planning reforms. Green infrastructure would then provide an ideal mechanism for ensuring that people were reconnected with nature and a green economy could thrive.

The LI also supports the embedding of European Landscape Convention principles into planning reforms. The European Landscape Convention (ELC) is the first international convention to focus specifically on landscape, and is dedicated exclusively to the protection, management and planning of all landscapes in Europe. The ELC became binding from 1 March 2007. The convention highlights the need to recognise landscape in law, to develop landscape policies dedicated to the protection, management and creation of landscapes, and to establish procedures for the participation of the general public and other stakeholders in the creation and implementation of landscape policies. The treaty has a useful role to play in reconciling human and natural systems, and integration of these in the planning design and management of landscapes. It offers a 'democratisation of landscape', which is in line with current thinking on localism, and promotes the aims of protecting special landscapes and managing and enhancing 'all landscape everywhere'.

3.2. Local government

Green infrastructure should be at the heart of local plans. It is the LI's view that local plans should be required to include green infrastructure strategies and the Duty to Co-operate should be extended specifically to include all forms of infrastructure including green infrastructure. The LI will in October publish *Local Green Infrastructure: helping communities make the most of their landscape*. This guide explains the ways in which green infrastructure thinking can be incorporated into the process of developing local plans.

3.3. Actions by civil society

Encouraging neighbourhoods to make the most of their landscape is at the heart of the LI's work on green infrastructure. The LI welcomes the NEWP commitment to establish Local Nature Partnerships and Nature Improvement Areas. However, if these are to succeed, there will be an urgent need for 'awareness-raising' within local communities in order for people who become involved in local decision-making and neighbourhood planning to better understand the value of landscape and wildlife.

4. What further research and/or evidence is required to develop practical programmes sufficiently detailed to deliver the White Paper's ambition to fully embed the value of nature into policy delivery?

A considerable amount of recent research is available, for example, the Natural Economy NW Partnership⁵, Community Forest Partnerships⁶ and Land Use Futures⁷ which provide an extremely important research and evidence base that seems to have been forgotten. The realignment of the emerging NPPF could be used to require all local planning authorities to embed the value of nature into planning policies and to require decision makers to apply the lessons of the NEWP.

Local authorities should be required to embed natural environment protection and enhancement into their current and future local plans – and encouraged to call on the expertise of landscape architects in order to do so effectively. This could include the production of GI maps using GIS, and the development of GI strategies both within and across local authority boundaries. Defra could consider safeguarding recent national guidance in PPS9: Biodiversity and Geological Conservation, and other relevant planning policy statements, before these are abolished by CLG. The LI considers that it is vitally important that these national guidelines should not be lost.

5. What resources will be needed to fully deliver the White Paper's ambitions and how can these best be provided? How might the value of 'services' provided by ecosystems to beneficiaries be translated into spending that will enhance the natural environment and make the most effective proposals for re-engagement

NEWP makes a considerable number of commitments to working with the EU to address environmental concerns internationally. Some of those resources could be channelled into the definition and promotion of sustainable economic growth in the UK, with extensive dissemination of current evidence, awareness raising and training across all Government departments, local authorities, statutory bodies, companies, investors and banks. LI, together with other organisations such as Natural England, TCPA, Design Council/CABE, and Community Forest partnerships would be well placed to assist in this role. Then Defra and CLG could set up a

⁵ <http://www.natureconomynorthwest.co.uk/about.php>

⁶ http://www.communityforest.org.uk/resources/monitoring_report.pdf

⁷ <http://www.bis.gov.uk/foresight/our-work/projects/published-projects/land-use-futures>

relatively low-cost system of awards, rewards, recognition and appreciation for those individuals and/or bodies who succeed in translating the value of ecosystem services into expenditure that directly benefits the natural environment.

The Natural Environment White Paper offers an inspiring opportunity to create new partnerships to provide 'awareness raising' and 'capacity building' within local communities, and to encourage local engagement in landscape planning. The LI considers that the Green Infrastructure Partnership would be an excellent starting point for building greater public awareness of, and active support for, coherent and resilient ecological networks and multi-functional landscapes.