

Natural England Board Member Lynn Crowe's speech to the Landscape Institute, London, 9th October.

How can housing and the natural environment coexist?

Introduction

- I am delighted to be given the opportunity to address the Landscape Institute – I hope that I can use the next 20 minutes or so to set out exactly why it is so important for Natural England, and the wider environmental sector, to break out of the conservation enclave; and also to highlight the vital role that you, the nation's landscape architects, have in creating and shaping tomorrow's landscapes – by transforming run down neighbourhoods; by bringing the natural environment into the heart of the built environment; and by creating more inspiring and greener places for people to live and work.
- I was particularly pleased that Natural England asked me to present this speech today. I've been working closely with the Landscape Institute - both at my University, and in sort of parallel professions as a countryside access manager in previous jobs for many years.
- And perhaps even more significantly, I happened to marry a landscape architect just about 25 years ago. There are quite a few old friends here in the audience today - they've promised not to heckle. So I feel like I've shared many of your aspirations, successes and frustrations over those years.
- As a young ecologist, I thought my career would be spent working in wildlife conservation - but whilst studying in London I came across a book which had a huge impact on me - Nan Fairbrother's `New Lives -

New Landscapes`. Her `call to arms` led me to focus more on the public benefits of a well planned and well managed environment, rather than just its intrinsic value.

- Someone earlier at lunch mentioned to me their surprise that an organisation like Natural England should produce a policy statement on housing growth - as we did earlier this year - `it didn't seem like our kind of thing`. So my contribution here today is really to share with you Natural England's motivation in entering this arena.

Setting the scene - Natural England

- Natural England was set up two years ago, finally bringing together the landscape movement, with its roots in the picturesque and the poetry of Wordsworth, and the scientists and naturalists who wanted wildlife 'protected' from harmful human activity.
- Our ambition is to see concern for the natural environment hard wired into all public policy. The natural environment should not be seen as an obstacle or barrier - when it actually provides the solution to many of the problems confronting us in modern life. The environment has exciting and unique contributions to make to housing and planning; health and well-being.
- We want to safeguard the green places that we already have; and we want to see these places managed so that nature can flourish and continue to prosper in a changing climate. And crucially, we want to ensure that everyone regardless of where they live in England, their background, age, religion, or income, has the opportunity to enjoy the wide range of benefits that contact with the natural world brings.
- To conserve and enhance our natural wealth in the long term we need to bring the natural environment back into people's lives.

- To help make this happen, I think Natural England can establish the evidence underpinning our aims, work with others to influence policy and decision makers, and then assist in translating the vision in to real projects on the ground.

People benefit from the natural environment

- This is what makes the urban agenda and housing such a critical issue for the natural environment. The natural environment is so much more than something to admire from afar or to sit and watch with David Attenborough on the BBC.
- It improves people's quality of life – with it people lead happy, healthier lives.
- So our focus is on bringing the natural environment to where people live – more Springwatch, where cameras follow ordinary wildlife doing remarkable things in people's gardens, than the full Attenborough epic filmed in glorious isolation with people nowhere to be seen.
- Roughly 80% of England's 50 plus million people live in towns and cities, and live busy lives where time and money are often in short supply.
- They are too often deprived of the wonders of nature by a combination of poor design and a historical lack of investment in urban green spaces.
- Through the 1970s, 80s and 90s people have gradually lost touch with nature, and today for many the allure and effortless entertainment

offered by the virtual world is much more appealing than the natural world.

- The lack of green space near to where people live, exacerbates the problem – gardens are concreted over to park the car, and recreation grounds and village greens are developed for superstores.
- Green space is being pushed into lay-bys, roundabouts and rectangular parks. Much of the green space that remains is a combination of 90% rye grass, 5% tarmac, with the remaining percentage evenly shared between cigarette butts, coke cans, and with added organic material of canine origin.
- Hardly competition for the I-Phone.
- As a result people walk less and there are fewer opportunities for children to get outside and explore.
- The truth is that people have become disconnected from the natural world and the link between environment and health, well-being and happiness has been temporarily lost.

The benefits of the natural environment

- There is nothing new here.
- Octavia Hill, was horrified by the misery of the urban slums in the 1880s. She said: *“Sometimes we think of nature as a luxury, but when the world was made, it was made very beautiful, and meant that we should live amongst its beauties, and that they should speak peace to us in our daily lives.”*

- But in today's world, the lack of action to provide well designed and well planned green space is creating new problems.
- 70% of people do not undertake the amount of daily activity recommended by the Chief Medical Officer. 25% of adults are obese, and that figure is expected to reach 50% by 2050.
- Depression and mental illness, especially among young people are also on the rise. Contact with the natural environment is shown to improve mood in 88% of people, reduces stress, blood pressure and muscle tension.
- And studies have shown that the presence of greenspace and vegetation is associated with a 50% reduction in the incidence of violent crime and property damage – the sort of low level criminality that blights people's lives.
- What we are advocating then is a 21st century version of Ebenezer Howard's Garden City vision at the turn of the 19th century. We want to see 'green infrastructure' at the heart of all new development, and resources committed to green refits of existing towns and cities where there is poor greenspace provision.
- And by setting and promoting a set of Access to Natural Green Space standards that national and local government, planners and developers should aspire to, we hope that the bar on green development will be raised.

Green infrastructure

- The concept of "Green Infrastructure" is now gaining currency both in professional and government circles, thanks no doubt to relentless

- *[Full list - DEFRA, Natural England, the Environment Agency and Forestry Commission - and environmental campaigning groups - such as Grassland Trust, Woodland Trust, Landscape Institute, Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens, Buglife, Sustain and the Ramblers Association.]*
- Natural England is also working hard, with a wide range of environmental organisations, to ensure greater recognition for the natural environment and a greater commitment to green infrastructure policies in all the Regional Spatial Strategies.
- This pressure from the environment sector is starting to secure some notable gains in strengthening strategies to deliver a greater number of higher quality greenspaces for people, exciting new landscapes, and new places in which wildlife might thrive, as well building in natural measures to deal with the impact of climate change.
- Slowly we are winning the argument that just as developers would never contemplate or indeed be allowed to get away with building new housing without sewer facilities or mains water – the grey infrastructure - there will also now be a requirement to consider green infrastructure in the same way.
- Government plans to build a large number of new homes in growth points and eco towns across the country are still on the table – although quite how the current economic outlook will affect these plans is not clear.
- But the impact of the financial crisis, with the construction industry almost at a standstill, could perversely give local planning authorities

and landscape architects more time to design and plan the sort of green infrastructure needed to support the sustainability of new homes when life returns to the housing market.

- And it provides an important window for anyone concerned to make the case for green spaces to be at the heart of all new development and to emphasise the benefits it brings both to people and the natural environment.
- Landscape architects have a critical role to play by shaping and delivering the GI strategies that are emerging across the country, working closely with local ecologists, community development professionals, and other 'social providers' in the health and education sectors.
- As well as advocating policy change and new strategies, we also need to work together to create real examples on the ground – so that people can see the transformation and feel the benefits of greener development, as is happening with the East London Green Grid and the Thames Gateway.

1. Green Grid in East London

- The Green Grid will create a living network of high quality open spaces across East London -corridors of open spaces and along the River Thames will connect town centres, public transport hubs, the urban fringe and major employment and residential areas.
- This sort of initiative will make a real difference to people's lives
- By providing new public open spaces and improving existing ones, especially in areas where decent access doesn't exist;
- By providing places for families to relax and play, and free green gyms so that people can lead healthier lives;
- By providing new wildlife sites so that people can experience nature at first hand in their everyday lives;
- And helping local residents live with climate change, naturally managing water, and reducing flood risk.

2. Thames and Medway Canal

- Part of the vision for the Thames Gateway is to restore existing landscape features - like the historic Thames and Medway Canal, originally built in the early 19th century.
- New waterfront development will breathe life back into the area. The restored canal will offer new opportunities for all forms of water based activities and a superb 8km greenway along the towpath will connect right to the platform at Higham Station.
- By designing and delivering development with green infrastructure at its heart, and with new natural greenspaces and green corridors that reconnect people and the natural world, then there is no reason for environmentalists to be fearful of housing.

I'd like to just mention a final area where I feel we should be working closely together - The European Landscape Convention

- Last year Bill Bryson, on becoming president of the Campaign to Protect Rural England posed an interesting question – he asked “why don’t you make the whole of England a National Park.”
- “It’s preposterous” He continued, “to say that some parts are better or more important than others. It’s rare and dangerously finite and every bit of it should be cherished”
- I am fairly confident that Natural England is not planning to attempt to designate all 13 million hectares of England as a National Park. We also remain absolutely committed to the protection of our designated landscapes as the `jewels in our crown` .
- But with the recent ratification of the European Landscape Convention, we are now signed up to the first international treaty to be exclusively

concerned with the protection, management and enhancement of ALL landscapes.

- The landscape sector should be wielding the Convention as a powerful tool to win over the unconvinced – this is certainly what Natural England intends to do.
- Of course, our challenge is to lift the words from page - to make them meaningful to people, and to help make it happen on the ground.

In Conclusion

- Today we need to create new landscapes that are resilient in the face of climate change, providing homes for people and for nature, bringing the two closer together.
- To truly connect people to the natural environment, it needs to be **their** natural environment. Shaped by local communities, and maintained by local communities, bringing people together and making them healthier and happier places to live.
- Our challenge – at Natural England and for the Landscape Institute - is to create the right political climate, at both a local and national government level, for greener communities.
- We need to give confidence both to business and to local and national government that greener development does deliver on its promises of multiple benefits – for people and for the environment.
- The work you do to create highly visible examples in strategic places, like the Thames Gateway, is vital to show people what can be achieved.

- You (the Landscape Institute) can show leadership with high-quality design, and at a strategic level, challenge developers and planning authorities to create homes which enhance people's lives and the natural environment.
- And on that note I will hand over to Adam White [Groundwork] so that we can see what the best of the current generation of designers are coming up with.