

## **6Cs GREEN INFRASTRUCTURE STRATEGY LAUNCH**

**5<sup>th</sup> July 2010, BioCity, Nottingham – Speech delivered by Christopher Pennell,  
Board Member Natural England**

### **Why is Green Infrastructure Useful?**

It's a great privilege to be able to contribute to today's launch of the brand-new Green Infrastructure Strategy for the 6Cs sub-region. It has surely been a great challenge to produce such a strategy over 2 years of hard work and innovative thinking for a complex area serving 1.9m people. This project has combined the best efforts of around 100 partners in a stunning joint effort to produce what I have little doubt will prove a hugely impressive piece of work.

My task this morning is to provide a short refresher on the role GI can and should play in how we plan to live and work in 21<sup>st</sup> century England.

I'm going to start, not with the glass half full, nor with it half empty; no, I'll start with it totally empty. Let's look at the nightmare scenario which is sadly not so far from the truth in parts of some English cities.....

So let's visit a metropolitan heat island, cut off from its rural hinterland, densely developed, tarmac'ed and concreted within an inch of its life, presenting a hardened carapace deflecting the relieving rain – with its neglected urban parks, devoid of bio-diversity, with broken swings rocking silently over discarded needles, a place too frightening to visit unless your purpose is to frighten. Streetscapes robbed of character and unrelieved by trees or small green spaces. A place of rundown cemeteries and abandoned allotments, where schools have sold their playing fields for development. Even in the wealthier suburbs – and all things here are relative – garden-grabbing developers have managed to suck their character dry.

Such rivers and streams which run through the city or town do so furtively behind abandoned warehouses in rubbish-strewn canalized concrete rings designed to avoid the floods...which come anyway for lack of upstream care and managed floodplains and because far too many front gardens have been lost to impervious hard-standing.

Where are the open spaces? Perhaps far too many are brownfield ex-industrial sites, waiting for someone brave enough to invest despite the rumours of contamination. Strangled within its greenbelt, the city's developers sometimes successfully reach out beyond the belt and blight another tract of open countryside; but the city fathers remain proud of their greenbelt, although it remains bereft of any beneficial purpose other than to constrain excess, useful though that is.

Where are the children? At one extreme – the apocryphal [or is it true?] feral children, roaming the urban wastelands dreaming of promotion to serious gang acceptance; and, at the other – strangely inactive children, eyes-glazed and faraway, locked for hours onto computer screens, waiting to be ferried in 4 by 4s by over-anxious parents from one venue to another. Obesity and depression reaches down from adults and now creeps up on children, costing the NHS a fortune for treatment because no-one has the wit to plan for prevention. Cut off from nature (bar , perhaps, an urban fox raid, a

pensioner's treasured bird-table, or a hurried school visit to a cash-strapped urban farm cum petting zoo) and alienated from their own surroundings, there's little sense of place, of pride or even of community.

And, on top of that, *here come the cuts!!!* But more of that later.

Let's look at Natural England's 'mission statement' (SLIDE) and consider whether NE has any role in this vision of dystopia. Let me pick out two features of this description of NE's purposes:

- "*NE works for people, places and nature.*"  
So NE is about linking people and places and nature – is that not also true of Green Infrastructure? Gone are the days when the Government's premier natural heritage body could concentrate on wildlife and neglect people and the places where they live.
- "*in rural, urban, coastal and marine areas.*"  
There may be some who still see NE as a countryside organisation with no locus in urban areas, but I want to assure you today of NE's passionate commitment to serving urban as well as rural areas, hence our involvement in the 6Cs GI Partnership. We recognise the interdependence of urban and rural areas and that, in some cases, defying expectations, biodiversity has flourished in urban pockets when it has been overwhelmed in some rural areas by industrialised intensive agriculture.

Now, back to my theme – why is GI useful?

I'll start to answer that by dwelling on this lengthy definition of Green Infrastructure offered by Natural England (SLIDE) and commenting on it.....

While a great deal can be done to provide community benefit at the site specific level or at the Green Space Strategy level (as in PPG 17, Planning for Open Space, Sport and Recreation), Green Infrastructure Strategies are very much at the next level up. GI works at a big picture level, showing how value can be added to the way we live, work and recreate within a landscape context, taking in hinterland and setting, and incorporating strategic links at sub-regional scale and beyond. It embraces private as well as public assets across the broadest range. It can, for example, embrace gardens, allotments, cemeteries, churchyards, sports grounds, small green spaces, urban parks, country parks, nature reserves, greenbelt, woodland, farmland, rivers, canals, ponds, lakes, reservoirs, derelict land and much much more.

And it is of the essence of GI that it is *strategically planned* so that its whole approach and its database of access and biodiversity opportunities and of environmental services can be embraced within Local Development Frameworks, as I hope the 6Cs GI strategy will be. It is also of the essence of GI that any given piece of land can provide a multiplicity of both ecological and quality of life services and that, if planned as part of a connected network, those benefits can be compounded. I shall return later to this important aspect of GI.

NE's definition of GI stresses more than most definitions the importance of character and distinctiveness. This reflects our commitment to the European Landscape

Convention and its injunction that those bodies responsible for land should carry out landscape character assessments and then produce landscape strategies and action plans based on those assessments; as, for example, the Peak District National Park Authority and the National Forest already have done. Last year the East Midlands Regional Landscape Partnership produced the first ever Regional Landscape Character Assessment, a monumental piece of work, providing, no doubt, a hugely valuable backdrop to the 6Cs partnership work. The value of rooting GI work in a full understanding of the distinctive character of the area covered by the strategy is that it better reflects what people value in their locality: it encourages and promotes a sense of distinctive place and both civic and community pride.

Let me now return to the interdependence of rural and urban areas. GI not only recognises the interplay between the built environment and its green assets but also the need to see urban areas in the wider setting of their rural hinterland. GI is useful because it exists within an urban area, but also surrounds that area, and also is threaded through it in both a natural and a planned way. For example – and remaining neutral from the 6Cs area – one of the glories of Sheffield is not only that it has the Peak District moorlands high on its doorstep, but also that the steep moorland river valleys run down through the city suburbs, providing recognisable, usable and well-loved green corridors to within half a mile of the city centre.

Just as much as we need to upgrade the value we get out of green assets within our urban areas, so too we should design GI strategies to get the best out of the rural hinterland. NE continues to support the concept of the designated greenbelt, which has done what it says on the tin – placed a tight belt around cities and towns to constrain unbridled urban sprawl; for example, ensuring that Derby, Leicester and Nottingham have not experienced the level of urban coalescence which has bedevilled West Midlands. But greenbelt land is all too often otherwise neglected on the basis that it has done the one job expected of it. A joint NE/CPRE report, “Green Belts – A Greener Future”, published earlier this year - which I recommend to you – goes a long way to describing what multi-functional expectations we ought to have of greenbelt land.

GI needs to be delivered at all spatial scales, but we have just learnt that regional spatial strategies are being revoked. The good fortune for the 6Cs strategy is that it was always a sub-regional initiative and it continues to be valid and useful so long as the local authority partners remain committed to it.

So that is GI; but a concept which has been growing in acceptance – and I for one recall having modestly promoted it for the last decade, particularly at public examinations of regional planning strategies – became all the more urgently needed as the last Government swung behind a drive to create 3m new homes by 2020, identifying major Growth Areas – like the one impacting on Northamptonshire in our region – and Growth Points, like the 6Cs, and even ecotowns (SLIDE). Re-invigorated growth, particularly of house-building, could either put increasing pressure on already burdened and neglected green assets or those assets could be enhanced and enriched by planning into that growth intelligent and sensitive use of those assets to benefit the environment, the economy and social structures. Green infrastructure came of age when planners and even developers recognised that it was

at least as important to development as is the grey infrastructure of roads, utilities and such like.

My opening nightmare of dystopia, where green assets within and around an urban area were either non-existent or severely degraded, leads to a cycle of depression, alienation and despair: these are not places where people by choice want to live, work and visit. Such places find it difficult to attract entrepreneurs and high value jobs, so they are condemned to low wage economies and probably over-dependent on the public sector for GDP.

At the core of the GI concept is that the identification of green assets, their improvement, the creation of new green assets, and their strategically planned connectivity can boost the attractiveness of an area environmentally, economically and socially – in short, sustainably. (SLIDE) But the important additional ingredient required – as I mentioned earlier in analysing the GI definition – is to fully exploit the potential multifunctionality of land. Instead of regarding, for example, greenbelt as solely benefitting people by constraining a town's outward sprawl, greenbelt could additionally be enhanced and imaginatively exploited for recreation opportunities, for biodiversity, for flood protection, etc. (SLIDE) Here we see the same piece of land and loop of the river round Shrewsbury providing space for public recreation, a transport route for cycling and walking, a wildlife habitat and movement corridor, and a flood storage zone.

Emda's own GI toolkit lists the functions which GI can provide, often from the same piece of land or from connected green assets.....

1. under the environmental category:
  - flood amelioration
  - air quality amelioration
  - increased biodiversity and flexibility in the face of climate change
  - renewable energy
2. under the economic category:
  - food production
  - labour productivity (arising from improved wellbeing and visual benefits)
  - improved image and inward investment
  - contribution to regeneration
  - contribution to tourism
3. under the social category:
  - improved recreation and amenity
  - accessible natural greenspace
  - improved physical and mental health
  - new education resources opened up
  - enhanced cultural heritage
  - a deeper sense of place and community cohesion.

And that analysis comes from the hard-nosed economic outlook of an RDA, so my thanks to Emda, as their future is in the balance, for embracing GI.

Emda go on to analyse the main beneficiaries from investment in GI, citing local communities, local businesses, user groups, local authorities, and investors and

developers. There's something for everyone – although I would add to the list the NHS and the natural environment itself. Let's just look at the value which Emda says GI provides to one of those beneficiary groups, local communities:

- better quality of life and improved mental health
- greater social inclusivity and a more accessible environment
- higher levels of civic pride
- increased property prices
- reduced pollution
- better security and less crime
- improved access to amenity greenspace for leisure activities

Now doesn't that endorse how GI can be useful – and that's only for one group of beneficiaries! Already we have moved a long way from my nightmare scenario.

Ideally NE believes that good green infrastructure should embrace what we call the ANGSt standards. I have set them out on this SLIDE. They are good standards to aim for and, of course, existing green assets, if enhanced and looked after, may go a long way towards meeting the standards; but simply mapping those existing assets and revealing the gaps will quickly suggest the priorities for creating new greenspace.

For anyone who isn't aware of it, NE has published comprehensive Green Infrastructure Guidance (SLIDE) which is available on our website. It is a substantial piece of work and well worth consulting.

I would now like to draw your attention to PPS12 and what it says about the core strategy in local spatial plans (SLIDE). The core strategy *“should be supported by evidence of what physical, social and green infrastructure is needed to enable the amount of development proposed for the area, taking account of its type and distribution. This evidence should cover who will provide the infrastructure and when it will be provided.”* Here is proof positive of GI's acceptance into high-level planning policy, but it is still justified on the back of development. What we need to recognise is that the benefits of improved GI need to be visited on – or call it retro-fitted onto – existing urban areas as well as into new developments as a matter of planning policy. I am sure you will find that the strategy you are launching today will provide the robust evidence base and strategic thinking needed to build GI into local LDFs. While a GI strategy could be adopted as Supplementary Planning Guidance, it is much better to embed the strategic thinking into an LDF's core strategy and into its spatial mapping, and then, on a belt and braces basis, add it as SPD too!

GI does not respect administrative boundaries (SLIDE): green assets, like woodlands, often overlap such boundaries and river corridors run through several administrative units. Many of the solutions we seek for wildlife in the face of climate change and for people, in terms of securing ecosystems services from one administrative area to another where they live, require us to strategically plan for GI across boundaries and to enter into partnerships to do so. It is hugely to the credit of the 3 counties, the 3 cities and the 14 other local authorities involved in the 6Cs initiative that they have formed such a productive strategic partnership with each other and with important players from other sectors.

It is to be hoped that the goodwill and positive outcomes derived from this partnership will survive recent political changes and the tougher financial outlook. (SLIDE). The

loss of the formal regional dimension in our national life in no way undermines the value of voluntarily undertaken sub-regional – or should I call them supra-local – initiatives like this one. The merits of the 6Cs prescription for GI in this complex Growth Point are no less valid because of the change of Government, because it was always a voluntary partnership which produced them. This achievement must not be allowed to descend into divisive localism.

What hope can we have that the Coalition rigours will not snuff out GI aspirations? Well, a careful trawl through the Coalition Agreement produces these positive signals (and I quote):

- “We will introduce measures to protect wildlife and promote green spaces and wildlife corridors in order to halt the loss of habitats and restore biodiversity.”
- “We will launch a national tree planting campaign.”
- We will create a presumption in favour of sustainable development in the planning system.”
- “[We will give] councils new powers to stop ‘garden grabbing’”
- We will maintain the Green Belt, SSSIs and other environmental protections, and create a new designation – similar to SSSIs – to protect green areas of particular importance to local communities.”
- “[We will] prevent unnecessary building in areas of high flood risk.”
- “We will radically reform the planning system to give neighbourhoods far more ability to determine the shape of the places in which their inhabitants live....”

There is much here on which to pin some policy hope. There is also the political will to better reflect ‘localism’ – something less than national and less than regional. While that implies a reversion to individual local authorities, there appears to be plenty of goodwill towards councils who voluntarily choose to work in wider partnerships, as the 6Cs partners have already done. Eric Pickles, the CLG Secretary of State, is steeped in local authority workings and Caroline Spelman at Defra is an ardent defender of greenbelt as a greenbelt constituency MP.

While the medium-term prospects for public sector GI funding must be poor within existing urban areas, the prospects within growth areas must surely remain much better. Private development funding must be top-sliced to provide GI just as it has to be used to help to provide grey infrastructure. And don’t forget that there are funders still around who will continue to remain relevant even in these tougher times; eg. HLF ‘Parks for the People’ funding has transformed many urban parks and their ‘Landscape Partnership Scheme’ has in a number of cases enhanced green infrastructure serving urban areas. On top of the usual funding sources, we will have to be more inventive than in the past: sure, there are Sec 106 agreements which may produce GI benefits, but newer concepts, like conservation credits, may well be developed over the medium-term.

In a time when we face the prospect of public sector retreat and huge expectations of the private sector, it even more important that we promote the merits of Green Infrastructure which has the potential, perhaps not to introduce utopia tomorrow, but at least to cost effectively and gradually roll back dystopia. Congratulations to the 6Cs partnership for serving up a solution just when solutions are desperately needed.

