

Natural England Board



Meeting: 9
Date: 13 February 2008

Paper No: **NEB PU09 08**

Title: **Natural England's Draft Policy on Housing Growth and Green Infrastructure**

Sponsor: **Andrew Wood, Executive Director Evidence and Policy**

1. Purpose

- 1.1 The purpose of the paper is to set out Natural England's draft policy on future housing growth, including the provision of green infrastructure.
- 1.2 This policy will underpin our work to influence Government planning, housing and urban regeneration policies, guide our responses to spatial plans and planning casework and underpin a future programme of work in this area.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 It is recommended that the Board agree this draft policy on housing growth and green infrastructure and the definition and key principles of green infrastructure in Annex 2. Following consultation the final version will be circulated to all Board members for comment, and the policy signed off by Chair.

3. Background

- 3.1 The Board considered a paper "*Natural England's policy position on Housing Growth and Green Infrastructure: Pre-scoping paper on Principles*" at its 10 October 2007 meeting (NEB P07 28) and asked that a further paper be discussed in more detail at a Board workshop. This was held on 11 December 2007 (NEB W08 01).

4. Issues

- 4.1 The Government is seeking an additional 3 million homes by 2020. About one million of these can be built on brownfield or surplus publicly owned land, leaving close to 2 million homes to be provided elsewhere. Such an expansion of house building would have significant implications for the natural environment.
- 4.2 We support the Government's emphasis both on urban regeneration and on the creation of new sustainable communities that incorporate all the services and facilities required by a community.

- 4.3 This is a broad agenda, some of which is outwith our specific expertise so we should concentrate our engagement on the broad *location* of new housing and the *nature* of new development.

5. Natural England's draft policy on housing growth and green infrastructure

- 5.1 We need two types of policy statement to guide our work on housing and green infrastructure. *Firstly*, we should adopt an overarching policy for the topic; and *secondly*, we need specific policies on sustainable location, environmental capacity, environmental quality and green infrastructure. These are set out below and further developed in Annex 1.

5.2. An overarching policy on housing growth

- 5.2.1. Natural England believes that necessary housing growth should be accommodated with minimum impact on the natural environment and deliver maximum benefits for the natural environment and people together.
- 5.2.2. We support the plan-led approach to housing growth and will use our role as a statutory consultee on spatial plans and development proposals to deliver our policy.

5.3. Sustainable location

- 5.3.1. Development should avoid environmental assets such as protected landscapes, habitats, sites, species and floodplains and promote sustainable travel patterns. Policies and decisions on development proposals should conserve valued environmental assets by seeking first to avoid loss or harm, before considering the need for mitigation or compensatory measures.
- 5.3.2. All potential options should be considered in the search for the most sustainable locations to meet the country's long-term development needs. Whilst we support the valuable urban containment role played by the Green Belt, a strategic review of Green Belt boundaries should form an integral part of the regional appraisal of future development options. In particular, we believe it is time for a refresh of Green Belt policy to see how it might evolve to fit twenty first century circumstances and deliver more positive benefits for the natural environment and people's enjoyment of it.

5.3.3. Evidence

Government planning policy¹ emphasises the protection and enhancement of the natural environment as a key role for the planning system and the planning system has generally worked well to protect England's finest environmental assets. Natural England will continue to use its role as a statutory consultee on spatial plans and many development proposals to ensure that development avoids harm to all environmental assets. Further evidence will be needed on the detailed operation of Green Belt policy and

¹ As set out in particular in *Planning Policy Statement 1: Delivering Sustainable Development* (2005), *Planning Policy Statement 7: Sustainable Development in Rural Areas* (2004) and *Planning Policy Statement 9: Biodiversity and Geological Conservation* (2005).

the condition of Green Belt land in order to develop our thinking on the Green Belt.

5.3.4. Proposed Policy Position 1

Natural England believes that the most environmentally sustainable locations should be found for new housing development.

5.4. Environmental capacity

5.4.1. The capacity of the environment to accommodate development will vary from place to place and we believe that the search for the most environmentally sustainable locations for future development should be based on a thorough understanding of environmental capacity and the cumulative impacts of development. Environmental capacity should be considered in the round for the whole country, for the region, sub-region and at local level. Development should enhance the environmental capacity of an area.

5.4.2. Evidence

Natural England is undertaking work on the cumulative impacts of development. Broader work on environmental capacity is being developed by regional bodies in several regions to inform regional spatial strategies². Defra is also exploring, with partners including Natural England, the concepts of environmental limits and ecosystem services³. Specific Natural England targets are likely to explore further how these related concepts can work together to develop an approach to underpin spatial planning decisions.

5.4.3. Proposed Policy Position 2

Natural England believes that an assessment of environmental capacity should be central to decisions on future development.

5.5. Environmental quality

5.5.1. All new development should create high quality, locally distinctive, resource efficient places where people want to live and work. Development should deliver significant benefits for the natural environment, including environmental enhancement and climate change mitigation and adaptation measures, as well as provision for recreation and access. The statutory requirements for Growth Areas, Growth Points and Eco-towns should incorporate stringent environmental standards so that they become genuine exemplars of environmentally sustainable development.

² Land Use Consultants (2008)- *Environmental Capacity in the East of England Draft Final Report*, Entec UK (2007) *North West Environmental Capacity Scoping Study, Final Report*

³ Defra (2006) *Defining and identifying environmental limits for sustainable development-a scoping study. Final Overview Report*, Defra (2007) *An introductory guide to valuing ecosystem services*, Defra (2007) *Securing a Healthy Natural Environment: An Action Plan for embedding an ecosystems approach*.

5.5.2. Evidence

Much new housing development is of mediocre quality⁴. In response, Government is increasingly placing the emphasis on improving the quality of new housing development⁵. Natural England is also working with key partners in the Growth Areas, Growth Points and proposed Eco-towns to help develop exemplars to show what can be done in order to help improve the quality of new development everywhere.

5.5.3. Proposed Policy Position 3

Natural England believes that the environmental quality of all new housing development should be substantially improved.

5.6. Green infrastructure

5.6.1. Networks of multi-functional greenspace providing a wide range of environmental and quality of life benefits should be identified in regional and local plans and designed into all major new development and regeneration schemes from the outset. Government should make provision for substantial new funding for the creation and long-term maintenance of extensive green infrastructure, including through the proposed Community Infrastructure Levy. A definition and key principles of green infrastructure are attached at Annex 2.

5.6.2. Evidence

Green infrastructure is increasingly recognised as an essential component of any truly sustainable development and the most effective means of providing a wide range of ecosystem services, quality of life and health benefits. The importance of green infrastructure was confirmed by the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution's 2007 report on the Urban Environment.

5.6.3. Proposed Policy Position 4

Natural England believes that the provision of green infrastructure should be an integral part of the creation of sustainable communities throughout England.

⁴ CABE (2004) *Housing Audit: Assessing the Design Quality of New Homes*, CABE (2007) *A Sense of Place- what residents think of their new homes*, DTI (2006) *Review of Sustainable Construction*.

⁵ Communities and Local Government- (2006) *Planning Policy Statement 3: Housing*, (2006) *Code for Sustainable Homes*

Annex 1: An associated programme

To complement our policy on housing growth and green infrastructure, we plan to take forward work in the following areas:

- Developing Natural England's overarching policy on spatial planning (of which housing and green infrastructure are a component) and transport policy.
- Developing our policies in the following areas- Community Infrastructure Levy and Planning Obligations, Brownfield land and Buildings, Settlements and Landscapes.
- Producing technical guidance for staff on what we want to see in Regional Spatial Strategies and Local Development Frameworks and a refresh of the joint statutory bodies' publication *Environmental Quality in Spatial Planning*.
- Developing our thinking and evidence base on environmental capacity, eco-system services and the cumulative impacts of development, including the funding and other mechanisms needed to take these concepts forward.
- Green Belt- developing the evidence base relating to the condition of Green Belt land, progressing a "Greening the Green Belt" initiative to improve the environmental quality of the Green Belt and pressing Government for a refresh of Green Belt policy.
- Green infrastructure- continuing to influence the development of Green Infrastructure Strategies for the Growth Areas and Growth Points, setting environmental standards for Growth Points and Eco-towns, producing a detailed green infrastructure 'vision statement' and good practice guidance, helping to develop master plans and influencing exemplar developments.

Annex 2: Green Infrastructure

Natural England's definition of Green Infrastructure

Green Infrastructure (GI) is a strategically planned and delivered network comprising the broadest range of high quality green spaces and other environmental features. It should be designed and managed as a multi-functional resource capable of delivering those ecological services and quality of life benefits required by the communities it serves and needed to underpin sustainability. Its design and management should also respect and enhance the character and distinctiveness of an area with regard to habitats and landscape types.

Green Infrastructure includes established green spaces and new sites and should thread through and surround the built environment and connect the urban area to its wider rural hinterland. Consequently, it needs to be delivered at all spatial scales – regional, sub-regional, local and neighbourhood levels, accommodating both accessible natural green spaces within local communities and often much larger sites in the urban fringe and wider countryside.

Key Principles for Green Infrastructure

Natural England believes that Green Infrastructure should:

- be delivered via a co-ordinated network that provides the broadest range of ecosystem services and environmentally based social benefits. These include embedding wildlife rich and varied habitats in urban and rural areas, providing recreational spaces (with consequent health benefits), supporting education and providing climate change adaptation measures;
- emphasise the 'multifunctionality' of the green network as a whole and, as appropriate, of individual sites;
- be delivered by co-ordinated planning, delivery and management across local authority departments and boundaries and across different sectors;
- seek physical and functional connectivity between sites at all levels and right across a town, city or sub-region, shaped by local character and distinctiveness in terms of species, habitats, landscape and townscape;
- incorporate all the green spaces of a town or city, both public and private, and connect with the wider countryside;
- be delivered primarily through focussed Green Infrastructure (GI) strategies and the spatial planning system of Regional Spatial Strategies and Local Development Frameworks;
- provide a strategic framework for identifying and protecting those brownfield sites that represent important habitats or very valuable social spaces;
- be established as a permanent resource with financial support for its continued maintenance and adaptation.