

The Natural Choice

What the Natural Environment White Paper means for local authorities

Evidence suggests that a healthy natural environment is a cost-effective tool that can help local authorities to:

- support economic and social regeneration,
- improve public health,
- improve educational outcomes,
- reduce crime and antisocial behaviour,
- help communities adapt to climate change; and
- improve quality of life across an entire area.

Across the country local authorities are already leading the way in improving the quality of their environment in order to bring these benefits to their communities. The White Paper has been inspired by this work. Our ambition is to ensure that the benefits of high quality natural environments are available to everyone. We want this to be the first generation to leave the natural environment of England in a better state than it inherited.

What is a White Paper? Why do we need one now?

A White Paper is a statement by Government of its vision on a key policy issue, setting out the long term direction of travel. This White



© Leeds City Council

Paper responds to compelling new evidence about the state of our natural environment.

The UK National Ecosystem Assessment (NEA) published in June 2011 assessed the social and economic benefits we get from the natural environment and showed that 30% are in decline. The NEA specifically highlights reductions in both the quality and quantity of urban green space. One in six urban local authorities believe their green spaces are declining. In addition to setting out the risks we all face if such declines are not tackled, the NEA also highlights the huge opportunities for improved health, wealth and happiness if we take action now.

How does this affect local authorities?

The White Paper does not pose any additional burdens on local authorities but it recognises that success in protecting and improving the natural environment will depend on action taken at local level. Local

authorities possess the strategic overview, local knowledge and statutory powers required to make the vision set out in this White Paper a reality.

Working in partnership

There are already many highly effective local partnerships with a focus on different aspects of the natural environment. We will encourage existing partnerships to join-up and integrate action to achieve multiple benefits – for example, on water and air quality, biodiversity, climate change adaptation and provision of green infrastructure. And we want to help new partnerships to emerge.

The White Paper sets out how we will help such groups to come together to become **Local Nature Partnerships**. This will enable local authorities to work with a range of partners including land managers, businesses and conservation organisations to identify opportunities to protect and improve nature at local level. To support both new and existing

partnerships who want to adopt this integrated approach, **we will provide £1 million in 2011/12 to build capacity for Local Nature Partnerships.**

Local Nature Partnerships will link action to protect and improve the natural environment with wider national and local social and economic priorities. They are encouraged to make links with Local Enterprise Partnerships and Health and Wellbeing Boards.

Making the links through new Nature Improvement Areas

The natural environment is sometimes seen as a series of disconnected places – gardens, parks, farmland, forests, coastland, wetlands, rivers and seas. The 2010 Lawton review, *Making Space for Nature*, reported that the natural environment in England is highly fragmented and can't respond effectively to new pressures such as climate change and population growth.

We should be thinking not of isolated spots of green on a map of England but of a thriving green network linking, wildlife sites with farmland, forestry and urban parks and gardens. We will encourage local partnerships to create new **Nature Improvement Areas** (NIAs) where there are significant

opportunities to enhance and reconnect nature. To inspire action we will set up a competition to identify 12 initial areas and will provide **£7.5 million** to support this.

What powers do local authorities have to improve the environment?

The White Paper *Healthy Lives, Healthy People: our strategy for public health in England* gives new duties and powers for local authorities to improve the health of local people. Through the Localism Bill we will also give local authorities a general power of competence, which allows them to do anything which is not prohibited by law, freeing them to innovate in response to local needs.

Local authorities have duties to facilitate coherent and resilient ecological networks through the planning system. The White Paper sets out how we expect the planning system to contribute to our objective of no net loss of biodiversity as part of sustainable development. For example, we are inviting local authorities to pilot a new approach to **biodiversity offsetting**, working with developers to deliver compensation for unavoidable habitat loss.

These measures ensure local authorities have the tools to improve the environment in order to regenerate neighbourhoods and help ensure that everyone has the opportunity to benefit from the advantages of living close to nature.

What new opportunities will communities have?

This White Paper emphasises the opportunities for local people to take action to protect and improve green spaces which are important to them. Communities will have new rights, including the opportunity to identify important local green spaces and bid for them if they come up for sale or lease; and the right to draw up neighbourhood development plans.

How will Government help?

The Government's role is to ensure that local authorities and the communities they serve have the tools and freedoms they need to take action. We will:

- support the development of Local Nature Partnerships;
- support the creation of Nature Improvement Areas;
- consult on proposals for a new Green Areas Designation to protect local green spaces;
- reform the planning system so that it is simpler and fairer, while still protecting the environment;
- establish a Green Infrastructure Partnership to consider how green infrastructure can improve communities' health, quality of life and resilience to climate change,
- provide new online resources which make local-level environmental information accessible to everyone.

