

The Second Nature Improvement Area Best Practice Network Event

Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Councillor Stephen Houghton CBE welcomed over thirty representatives from Nature Improvement Areas to Barnsley, an area which played a key part in Britain's industrial past providing coal and chemicals to fuel industrial expansion throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries. Dearne Valley became one of the most polluted areas of western Europe, and with the decline of industry over the last 50 years has left a scarred and polluted landscape, few employment opportunities and a population facing significant health inequalities and challenges such as flooding.

The transformation of the area to meet the future depends hugely on the area changing itself into a high quality, nature rich environment where people thrive and new low carbon based industry wishes to invest. The Dearne Valley Green Heart NIA is a key part of that process and the interaction of land use policy and action on the ground is an important part of making that change and inspiring existing and future generations to shape their futures.

Dusty Gedge, followed Cllr Houghton and provided an inspiring presentation. This looked at the way in which government and local policy can facilitate land use planning to provide multiple benefits from, for example, the use of green roofs and sustainable drainage to support enhanced ecosystems and provide benefits such as flood alleviation and minimising diffuse pollution. The example of Lintz in Austria is pertinent as an ex Steel producing town which has had a mandatory requirement for green roofs on every industrial building since 1984. The use of rain gardens has been beneficial also in reducing flood run off from domestic property as also improving water quality generally through the use of green roofs, rain gardens and sustainable drainage systems. These were all becoming increasingly necessary in urban areas as part of a green infrastructure necessary to secure sustainable and ecologically functioning systems.



Stephen Butler the Planning Policy Manager for Natural Environment of Doncaster Council presented on Biodiversity Offsetting indicating that this needs to work to compliment strategies such as NIAs and take account of cumulative impacts.

There was then a visit by coach around the Dearne Valley looking at places critical to the success of the NIA and the relationship between economic activity and environmental transformation. Never to be

forgotten, a blizzard striking at the same time as delegates for the day ascended the north face of Grimethorpe Tip, now transformed from its industrial past into a grass clad green oasis. Sadly on this attempt the summit was not reached and the safety and warmth of the coach was a welcome retreat.

## Workshop summary: Making the most of spatial planning, policy and tools

Delegates were asked about development of policies about the NIA so far in their NIA partnership areas. Most were at **early stages in developing policy** and there was inconsistency between local planning authorities (LPAs) within individual NIAs in regards to their approaches and interest. Delegates felt that the NIA should at least be **included on the key diagram**. There was the appreciation that the ability for partnerships to **impact on policies was reliant upon the stage of LPA local plan documents** and the stage would impact on whether partnerships could focus on strategic or retrofit options. A good example of a policy delivering landscape scale project objectives was given as the Greater Manchester Green Heart policy.



The benefits of including the NIA boundary in local plan documents and having a specific policy related to it were identified as being **important to highlight the NIA to planners and developers** and integrate delivery across different departments of the council and to **link to mapped ecological network requirement in the NPPF** (not doing this raises risk of challenge from Planning Inspectorate or Natural England as a statutory consultee).

A key question all NIAs should ask themselves is **‘what does being in an NIA mean?’** and **this will be the basis for any policy creation**. If only asking for biodiversity gain/GI contribution then this should be delivered anyway. Partnerships should ask **‘what makes planning in the NIA different to outside the NIA?’** - the Nene Valley have spent time doing this and habitat connectivity is the key there with an onus for developers to reconnect areas of habitat. NPPF guidance is that policies should only be used to help determine applications so partnerships will need to think how they weave NIA aspirations into this. **The Doncaster NIA policy doesn’t ask for more from developers but asks for them to do things differently** – connectivity is the key here as well.

Inclusion of a policy in the local plan allows a more detailed SPD to be produced and **gives further guidance extra weight**. It is also important to remember the **local plan is a strategic document and not just DM tool** – deliverability of policies needs to be shown and can be more than just planning. Policies should aim to provide clear guidance to developers such as through a clear ‘shopping list’ of what wanted/appropriate.

Other **links were made to emerging neighbourhood plans**, experiences so far recognise there are opportunities here because neighbourhood plans **carry more weight than non-strategic policies** in local plans and will get **25% of any CIL payments** from developments in the area. Some NIA projects are proactively engaging parishes; mainly they see the NIA as positive but also often as a way of keeping development out.

Asked whether there was a need for more guidance to LPAs and NIAs people generally felt there wasn't the need as each NIA will have different requirements from planning policies e.g. some will have clear guidelines for developments whilst others will be more focused on directing developer contributions to specific projects and delivery. If guidance is to come it would need to be delivered quickly and be clear and concise (a big call not to sit on the fence). Brian McDonald mentioned **CLG were interested in collecting case studies from NIAs** and delegates felt this would be useful along with **sharing policy development and ideas on huddle or through the best practice network.**



Discussion was held about other tools that could be used to deliver through the planning system. **Biodiversity offsetting** was felt to be at too early a stage to deliver during the remaining two year NIA funding period but there were opportunities into the longer term to use this tool. **Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL)** was also felt to provide a complicated and unreliable delivery mechanism, the issue was raised that

putting biodiversity on a list with schools and infrastructure might not encourage high levels of investment in it as an option. For the short term **section 106** was felt to be the most useful tool.

The **strategic link to Local Nature Partnerships (LNPs)** was also highlighted as an opportunity that had not been fully explored within NIAs. The LNPs have a strategic planning role and there is a duty to co-operate with them on LPAs, LNPs have also been given the responsibility by DEFRA to designate future NIAs, although the mechanism and criteria to do this is currently unclear. This needs exploring further.

#### Workshop summary: Making the most of onsite opportunities

This workshop used a map of a potential employment site from Barnsley's recent Sites and Allocations DPD consultation to discuss opportunities on development sites and how existing requirements could be better managed to deliver for NIA objectives.

The key issues that were highlighted were **water management, green roofs**, the need for **strong policy support** and the need for **high quality jobs and high number job opportunities.**

From the maps it was clear there were a number of **water courses within the development site** and has important connection with the vision for the Dearne Valley Green Heart NIA (DVGH NIA) and the project objectives. The management of water onsite was discussed and delegates felt that the requirement for developers to **produce a water strategy for the site** (based on a flood risk assessment) would ensure that water is considered early in the process and designed into the site rather than added in later. The main aim is to ensure the site, both built and natural elements, are **permeable to water.** The use of **SUDS, swales**

**and natural watercourses** was promoted. The use of swales and wet woodland also has an added benefit of providing a **visual barrier** and helping to assimilate developments into the wider landscape.

The Environment Agency (EA) and LPA have responsibility between them for different elements of flooding and will want to see no net increase in water entering the watercourses that will result in flooding. Delegates suggested that **no surface water should go into pipes** and developments should seek to **deal with water onsite** as the recommended approach; the exact percentage of how much of the water should be dealt with at source varied from 50-80% and there was the suggestion of penalties for developments not meeting a certain percentage.

Onsite there was felt to be opportunities to **reprofile the dyke** to improve geometry and provide a central feature and corridor. **Links between the watercourses onsite and the wider river system** should be made and decisions made on a whole system response.

Other onsite opportunities were identified to integrate other habitats both at ground level and through the design of **green roofs**. A target should be set for the **percentage of green roof space** to be **greened for appropriate species for the area** (it was noted that freight shed unlikely to be suitable mitigation for waders currently roosting on site, however smaller units are likely to be able to have green roofs that could potentially mitigate for this issue). It will be important for any planning guidance to **provide clear specifications** of what flower species will be appropriate within the valley for both green roof and ground level habitat creation rather than leave to architect ecologist. One key **corridor** identified was the way leave **space under power lines**, this area cannot be built under so there are opportunities to develop a biodiverse corridor. **Native planting should be promoted** through the **species lists** and the benefits of appropriate ornamental plants e.g. birch forests have value in rainwater challenge and can help produce high level landscapes. There are added benefits of creating these habitats for future workers at the sites, providing them with high quality environment to relax and enjoy break times in.

The **importance of policy guidance** was highlighted. In particular it was felt that any SPD for the area should provide a **suite of options** to help make the case to planners and developers, ensure **whole-life decisions** are made to ensure appropriate management of features, set out **NVC plants** for roofs and ground level creation, fully **recognise the NIA** and achieve '**sustainable development**' through sustainability of the landscape that supports landscape scale conservation objectives. The use of offsetting was also discussed and the **benefits of using the offsetting score**.

Separately delegates felt there was a need for **national policy on what to do with 'shed' style developments**.

The type of development at the site was felt to be important. The general consensus was that "big sheds don't employ that many people" and **smaller units** (up to 1000m<sup>2</sup>) **provide better employment opportunities for local people** and **smaller units would also enable better integration** of water management and green infrastructure corridors. A high quality environment will attract high quality businesses. The Dearne Valley Eco Vision is to **attract low carbon businesses** in a 'high end' sustainable environment such as PV companies, rainfall harvesting companies and companies with **strong corporate responsibility** policies

e.g. Marks & Spencer. This ability to sell sites in the Dearne Valley as flagship sites will create a **positive cycle of investment**.

**Links to the local community** were raised as important and there is a need to make the site **permeable to people** as well as biodiversity and provide **sustainable transport links** between employment sites and where people live.