

## AGENDA ITEM 5

### WEST OF ENGLAND PARTNERSHIP 14<sup>th</sup> September 2007

#### “Developing a Green Infrastructure Tool for West of England”

#### Report by:

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#### Purposes of Report

1. To inform PTEG about the on-going work to develop a Green Infrastructure Tool for the sub-region.
2. To help ensure that this work is fully integrated into other planning work and environmental programmes in the sub-region.

#### Background

3. Green Infrastructure (GI) is the strategic, physical network of multifunctional green spaces between and within our cities, towns and villages, as well as the linkages between them. In a study undertaken in 2005 for the SW Regional Assembly, GI was defined as:

*“.....a strategic network of accessible multifunctional sites (including parks, woodland, informal open spaces, nature reserves and historic sites) as well as linkages (such as river corridors and floodplains, wildlife corridors and greenways). These contribute to people's well being, and together comprise a coherent managed resource responsive to evolving conditions.*

*GI should look beyond existing designations, identifying opportunities to enhance the physical and functional connectivity of assets, and to extend the flow of benefits for people (recreation and sport, health and well-being, economic), ecosystems, and natural ecological processes (air quality and sustainable water).”*

4. GI is not a new concept. It was originally developed in North Kent in the mid 1990s – initially under the name ‘Green Grid’ – as part of the response to the large-scale developments being proposed in the Thames Gateway. It has since been adopted under the Green Infrastructure name in many other growth areas around the UK which have developed GI Strategies, including Cambridgeshire, South Hampshire, Bedfordshire/Luton, the North West, and Milton Keynes.

5. On the back of the South West study in 2005, the GI approach was incorporated into the draft Regional Spatial Strategy. The RSS makes numerous references to the need for GI in the region, and includes a specific policy (GI1):

"Development of networks of Green Infrastructure (GI) will be required to enhance quality of life in the region and support the successful accommodation of change. GI networks will comprise multifunctional accessible connected assets, planned around existing environmental characteristics. This may take the form of protection, enhancement or extension of existing resources or the provision of new or replacement facilities.

When planning the proposed distribution of development, GI is required to be integral part of the development, with provision for a network of GI incorporated in the Spatial Strategy. Local Authority partners will:

- build upon existing expertise and initiatives to identify priorities and partnerships for GI;
- incorporate GI policies setting out broad locations for GI appropriate to the extent of and distribution of the development proposed, coordinated across administrative boundaries as appropriate; and
- develop a GI Plan with a delivery programme to support GI policies."

6. At the same time a West of England GI Working Group was formed in autumn 2005 by Sustainability West (an initiative of Business West at the time) and Avon Wildlife Trust to investigate the potential of GI to enable the environmental quality of the West of England to be retained and enhanced while accommodating the high levels of growth proposed in the RSS and in WEP's Vision 2026.
7. The early work of this Group prompted the Countryside Agency (now part of Natural England) to invite tenders for a first-phase study to map existing GI in the sub-region. The tender was won by a consortium of local environmental organisations comprising Avon Wildlife Trust, Bristol Regional Environmental Records Centre, and the Forest of Avon, and the study was completed during February/March 2006.
8. At the same time the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister announced a bidding round for projects in areas of the UK wishing to undertake fast rates of growth and development during the next 10 years. Six months later in October 2006, the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) confirmed 29 areas of the UK as 'New Growth Points'. These included the West of England, and one of the successful WEP bids awarded DCLG funding was a second-stage project to develop a Green Infrastructure Tool for the sub-region.
9. Since then, DCLG has emphasised the importance of creating green space as a key part of the New Growth Points programme in its 'More Affordable, More Sustainable' green paper on housing issued in July 2007:

*"The provision of more green spaces is a key component of plans developed in our Growth Areas and the New Growth Points programme focusing on:*

- the rural/urban fringe – to improve the interface between the urban and rural environments by providing improved access for people and wildlife;*
- habitat creation – to restore areas of the countryside back to a more natural state, providing people with more opportunities to experience and interact with their environment first hand;*
- habitat protection – to provide rare and sensitive habitat with the increased protection through buffering and habitat enhancement works, securing their biodiversity value for the future; and*
- integration of green space within urban development."*

10. The current phase of GI work in the sub-region commenced in June 2007 and has to be completed by March 2008. The DCLG funding has been supplemented by further financial support from Natural England. The accountable body is South Gloucestershire Council, and the project is being managed on behalf of WEP by Avon Wildlife Trust and Forest of Avon.
11. The project is being steered by the Working Group which currently comprises representatives of GOSW, Natural England, West of England Partnership, the four UAs, English Heritage, Forest of Avon, and Avon Wildlife Trust.

### **The importance of GI in the West of England**

12. The sub-region has the highest density of people in the South West, with 20% of the region's total population. The RSS and WEP's Vision 2026 propose high rates of growth and development in the sub-region during the next 20 years.
13. A key component in the economic and social success of the sub-region is the area's environmental quality and the high quality of life that this offers. Yet there is a lack of public confidence that the next phase of development in the area will be any better than that during the 1980s, which has left the sub-region with a substantial deficit in public infrastructure (particularly transport) and a perceived loss of environmental quality.
14. Coordinated development of GI networks will be fundamental to enhancing the quality of life in the sub-region and ensuring that the built and natural environment can co-exist. A well-designed and integrated network of GI delivering a wide range of direct and indirect benefits to people, such as greater community cohesiveness, health and well being and local solutions to climate change will support the successful accommodation of change in the sub-region.
15. It is therefore fundamental that when planning the distribution of development within the sub-region, GI should be considered as an integral part of development, with provision for a network of GI incorporated into the spatial strategy. As well as addressing future development, it will be important to consider GI provision around existing environmental and cultural characteristics. GI in the WoE will be required to complement the overall

approach of urban concentration and extension to deliver good quality of life in urban areas through the provision of accessible GI as well as opportunities for access to the wider countryside.

16. The GI approach is not about constraining development, but providing planners, developers and other professionals with a tool with which to inform their decisions and also to help put in place a powerful green space network able to deliver significant benefits to new residents and existing communities alike, without which public resistance to high levels of development is likely to increase. The GI approach also aims to assist community organisations to confirm that the overall environmental quality of the area is being maintained or enhanced and that any deficiencies in existing GI provision are being tackled.
17. Areas proposed for substantial change in the sub-region provide significant opportunities for securing GI in association with new development. It is therefore important that a mechanism is available to planners, developers and the wider public to provide objective information and guidance as to the existing level of GI provision in the sub-region, and guidance to ensure that:
  - where new development is proposed there is at the very least no net loss in environmental quality in relation to agreed local standards either through:
    - the provision of quality GI space within the development site; or
    - the provision of suitable compensatory measures to create quality GI space off-site to mitigate any loss to be caused by the development.
  - the overall quality of the West of England's environment is being conserved and enhanced, rather than being eroded or lost.

### **Developing the Green Infrastructure Tool**

18. The objective of the current project funded by DCLG and Natural England is therefore to develop this GI mechanism and make it easily accessible to planners, developers and community organisations. The unique feature of the GI work in the West of England is that the mechanism is being developed as an interactive web-based Tool.
19. The Tool aims to be a practical and accessible website which provides specific guidelines on how to make appropriate provision for quality GI space both on-site and off-site within the framework of a GI Strategy for the sub-region.
20. The Tool includes guidelines on meeting any deficiencies in the existing GI provision locally and for enhancing GI strategically within the sub-region framework, for instance by plugging strategic gaps in GI, as part of development proposals. To enable focused planning, the indicative priorities for the different types of GI uses in different locations will be provided. Uses may encompass access routes, recreational open space, sport, landscape, historic environment, woodland planting, habitat creation to meet biodiversity targets, etc.
21. The Tool therefore aims to directly facilitate the bringing forward of development sites by building public confidence and providing measurable evidence that these issues have been addressed to agreed local standards and within a strategic framework.

22. It is essential that work on the Tool is fully integrated with the Open/Green Space Strategies and other documents being developed as part of the new Local Development Frameworks. GI needs to be part of the Core Strategy in each LDF, and it may be that use of the Tool within the sub-region could be reinforced through Supplementary Planning Documents developed jointly by the four UAs. The possibility of developing a 'model' SPD will be investigated as part of the current project.
23. During the next 6 months it is intended that there will be consultations with developers and with community organisations through a mix of individual meetings, workshops, public meetings, and on-line feedback on the Tool as it is developed and tested. Natural England is also keen to support further work during 2008/9 to encourage use of the Tool particularly by community organisations, and to promote the web-based approach across the SW region.
24. In summary the key aims of the Tool are to:
- Provide a practical tool to help realise the aspirations of the RSS and other local policy;
  - Become a principal mechanism for measuring implementation of relevant parts of the RSS within the sub-region - particularly Sections 3.6 and 3.7, Development Policy D (Infrastructure for Development), and Development Policy F (Urban Extensions Master Planning);
  - Build public confidence that environmental quality is an integral part of all new development within the sub-region, and reduce public concern and opposition to high rates of growth;
  - Remove uncertainty for planners and developers about what green space provision is appropriate for each new development within a strategic framework;
  - Facilitate the bringing forward of sites for development and urban extensions by enabling planners and developers to demonstrate that sustainability/environmental issues have been addressed to an agreed local standard;
  - Ensure that there is a consistent basis for the costing and financing of actual GI provision and maintenance as part of growth in the sub-region; and
  - Assist in the preparation of Core Strategies within the new Local Development Frameworks

#### **Recommendations:**

- (1) The Board to welcome the development of the Green Infrastructure Tool as a positive and practical measure towards achieving high rates of social and economic growth in the sub-region while retaining and enhancing the area's environmental quality**
- (2) The Board to encourage continuing support and input to the project through appropriate representation on the Steering Group**
- (3) The Board to decide how it wishes to be further informed about development of the Tool during the remainder of 2007/8, and whether it wishes to be directly involved in the proposed consultations**