

# PLANNING WITH NATURE: Making the case for a green infrastructure strategy

PUBLISHED	<p>PUBLIC PRACTICE, London, UK</p> <p>Public Practice is a not-for-profit social enterprise that places outstanding built environment experts within forward-thinking public authorities to build the public sector's capacity for proactive planning. <a href="http://www.publicpractice.org.uk">www.publicpractice.org.uk</a></p>
FILE NAME	PN017_A_Making the case for a green infrastructure strategy_V1
VERSION 1	Original version produced by Ben Smith, August 2020
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# PLANNING WITH NATURE:

## Making the case for a green infrastructure strategy

The following information is provided to support officers with making the case for developing a Green Infrastructure strategy where political buy-in is needed.

### WHY DO WE NEED A GI STRATEGY?

A GI strategy:

1. Is supported by both the NPPF and NPPG (see below), which encourage taking a strategic approach to incorporating GI into Local Plans and implementing planning decisions through an evidence-based approach.
2. Addresses the requirement to provide suitable avoidance or mitigation measures to manage any potential impacts of growth on protected sites.
3. Supports the provision of net biodiversity gain and the requirement for a tree planting strategy (reflecting the emerging requirements in the Environment Bill).
4. Ensures the future provision of green space to support the needs of new and existing communities.
5. Ensures that the District's natural assets are managed in a coherent and sensitive way.
6. Responds to the twin environment and climate change emergencies.
7. Supports healthy lifestyles through active travel and recreational opportunities.
8. Provides a coherent framework for the long-term management and maintenance of green infrastructure.
9. Provides evidence of the costs for securing delivery and management through the planning process.
10. Supports applications for external funding.

## WHAT IS THE PLANNING CONTEXT FOR A GI STRATEGY?

There are a number of statutory designations which support the provision of a GI Strategy:

1. Section 40 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act places a duty on all public authorities in England and Wales to have regard, in the exercise of their functions, to the purpose of conserving biodiversity.<sup>1</sup> A key purpose of this duty is to embed consideration of biodiversity as an integral part of policy and decision-making throughout the public sector, which should be seeking to make a significant contribution to the achievement of the commitments made by government in its 25 Year Environment Plan.<sup>2</sup> It therefore has implications beyond an Authority's planning function.
2. The Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981<sup>3</sup> (as amended) and the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000<sup>4</sup>, provide the primary legislative framework for the protection of wildlife, nature conservation, the countryside, national parks and public rights of way in the UK. This includes the legislative framework in relation to Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI).
3. The EU Habitats Directive<sup>5</sup> enshrines in legislation the conservation of the natural environment as it relates to sites of international importance, the requirements of which have been encapsulated in the UK Government's Conservation of Habitats and Species (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019<sup>6</sup> which came into force on 1 February 2020. The ultimate aim of the Directive is to 'maintain or restore, at favourable conservation status, natural habitats and species of wild fauna and flora of Community interest'.<sup>7</sup> The Directive established internationally designated sites of importance for biodiversity (Special Areas of Conservation (SAC), Special Protection Areas (SPA) and Ramsar sites. (Epping Forest, for example, has two internationally designated sites, being the Epping Forest SAC and the Lee Valley SPA and 'Ramsar' site).

In addition, there are a number of non-statutory designations relating to green infrastructure which may be relevant to an Authority where a district contains local designations, such as Local Nature Reserves, County Wildlife and Local Wildlife sites.

<sup>1</sup> UK Government, *Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act*, (2006)

<sup>2</sup> UK Government, *'A Green Future: Our 25 Year Plan to Improve the Environment'*, (2018)

<sup>3</sup> UK Government, *Wildlife and Countryside Act*, (1981)

<sup>4</sup> UK Government, *Countryside and Rights of Way Act*, (2000)

<sup>5</sup> EU, *Habitats Directive*

<sup>6</sup> UK Government, *The Conservation of Habitats and Species (Amendment)(EU Exit)Regulations*, (2019)

<sup>7</sup> EU, *Habitats Directive, Article 2(2)*, (2019)

## HOW CAN GI SUPPORT A CLIMATE RESPONSE?

The role of GI in responding to the Climate Emergency should not be underestimated. Global climate change and species protection provide clear drivers to introduce measures such as local GI networks. International agreements and legislation make provision for addressing both climate change and species protection, whilst a growing body of evidence identifies the value of nature to human health and well-being:

1. At a national level, legislative imperatives are included in the UK Climate Change Strategy, with the overarching 'net zero' emissions target by 2050 arising from the Climate Change Act 2008.<sup>8</sup>
2. The Government's 25 Year Environment Plan – 'A Green Future: Our 25 Year Plan to Improve the Environment' – sets out a framework to maintain and improve the environment for the next generation. It commits to:
  - Making sure that there are high-quality, accessible, natural spaces close to where people live and work, particularly in urban areas, and encouraging more people to spend time in them to benefit their health and well-being;
  - Focusing on increasing action from all sectors of society to improve the environment.
3. To complement its 25 Year Environmental Plan, Industrial Strategy and Clean Growth Strategy, the UK government launched a Clean Air Strategy in 2019 setting out comprehensive actions required across all parts of government and society to improve air quality.<sup>9</sup> The strategy sets out how we will protect the nation's health, the environment, secure clean growth and innovation, reduce emissions from transport, homes, farming and industry and monitor our progress.

The Government re-introduced the Environment Bill on 30 January 2020. The Bill sets out how the government plans to protect and improve the natural environment in the UK.<sup>10</sup> There are a number of elements within the Bill which are relevant to a GI Strategy including the proposed introduction of a mandatory requirement for biodiversity net gain in the planning system to ensure that new developments enhance biodiversity and create new green spaces for local communities to enjoy. In introducing the Bill, Government has made it clear that net gain requirements will supplement, not replace or undermine, existing protections for protected sites or irreplaceable habitats.

## WHAT DO THE NPPF AND NPPG SAY ABOUT GI?

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) sets out national policy for local planning authorities and decision-takers.<sup>11</sup> The NPPF defines green infrastructure as:

'a network of multi-functional green space, urban and rural, which is capable of delivering a wide range of environmental and quality of life benefits for local communities'<sup>12</sup>

For simplicity, this definition includes Blue Infrastructure.

<sup>8</sup> UK Government, Climate Change Act, (2008)

<sup>9</sup> UK Government, Clean Air Strategy, (2019)

<sup>10</sup> UK Government, Environment Bill, (2020)

<sup>11</sup> UK Government, National Planning Policy Framework, (2019)

<sup>12</sup> UK Government, National Planning Policy Framework, (2019) p.67

The NPPF states that there is a presumption in favour of sustainable development (paragraph 11), with sustainable development having economic, social and environmental objectives. An environmental objective means sustainable development should protect and enhance the natural, built and historic environment as well as protecting biodiversity, minimising pollution and adapting to climate change and the demands of a low carbon economy.

The NPPF outlines the relevance of GI to the development of policies within local plans and neighbourhood plans:

- Paragraph 20 highlights that ‘strategic policies should set out an overall strategy for the pattern, scale and quality of development, and make sufficient provision for...conservation and enhancement of the natural, built and historic environment, including landscapes and green infrastructure’.
- Paragraph 91 requires that planning policies and decisions should aim to achieve healthy, inclusive and safe places, referencing safe and accessible green infrastructure, sports facilities and high-quality public space as a means to achieving this.
- Paragraph 150 states that ‘new development should be planned for in ways that avoid increased vulnerability to the range of impacts arising from climate change...including through the planning of green infrastructure’.
- Paragraph 171 states that ‘Plans should...take a strategic approach to maintaining and enhancing networks of habitats and green infrastructure’.
- Paragraph 181 links the requirement for the identification of green infrastructure provision and enhancement at the plan making stage to the improvement of air quality or mitigation of impacts relating to this issue.

The National Planning Practice Guidance (NPPG) encourages a strategic approach to incorporating GI into local plans and implementing planning decisions through an evidence-based approach.<sup>13</sup> It emphasises the importance of GI to the delivery of high-quality sustainable development alongside other forms of infrastructure such as transport, energy, waste and water, with GI providing multiple benefits, notably ecosystem services, at a range of scales, derived from natural systems and processes.

The NPPG states that local authorities are required to provide suitable mitigation for potential impacts on international nature conservation sites and recommends the provision of open space to deliver a range of benefits and mitigation measures. It also requires the sustainable management of GI, which should be identified at the earliest stage, alongside the determination of sources of funding for its on-going management.

## EVIDENCING AND QUANTIFYING GI

The value of green space has long been recognised, but only more recently has it been evidenced through focused studies. For example:

- ‘Londoners avoid £950 million per year in health costs due to public green space’<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> UK Government, National Planning Practice Guidance, (2019)

<sup>14</sup> Greater London Authority, Natural capital accounts for public green space in London, (2017), p.3

- ‘Playing and learning outside is a fundamental part of childhood, and strong evidence from a four-year project commissioned by Natural England showed that learning outdoors results in children being happier, healthier and more motivated to learn’<sup>15</sup>

Other sources of evidence for the value of GI include:

- Fields in Trust, Revaluing Parks and Green Spaces: Measuring their economic and well-being value to individuals, (2018)
- World Health Organisation, Physical activity promotion in socially disadvantaged groups: principles for action, (2013)
- Natural England, Natural Connections Demonstration Project, (2012-2016)
- Public Health England, Everybody Active, Every Day, (2014)
- Greater London Authority, Natural Capital Accounts for Public Green Space in London, (2017)

<sup>15</sup> Fields in Trust, Revaluing Parks and Green Spaces, (2018), p.11-12