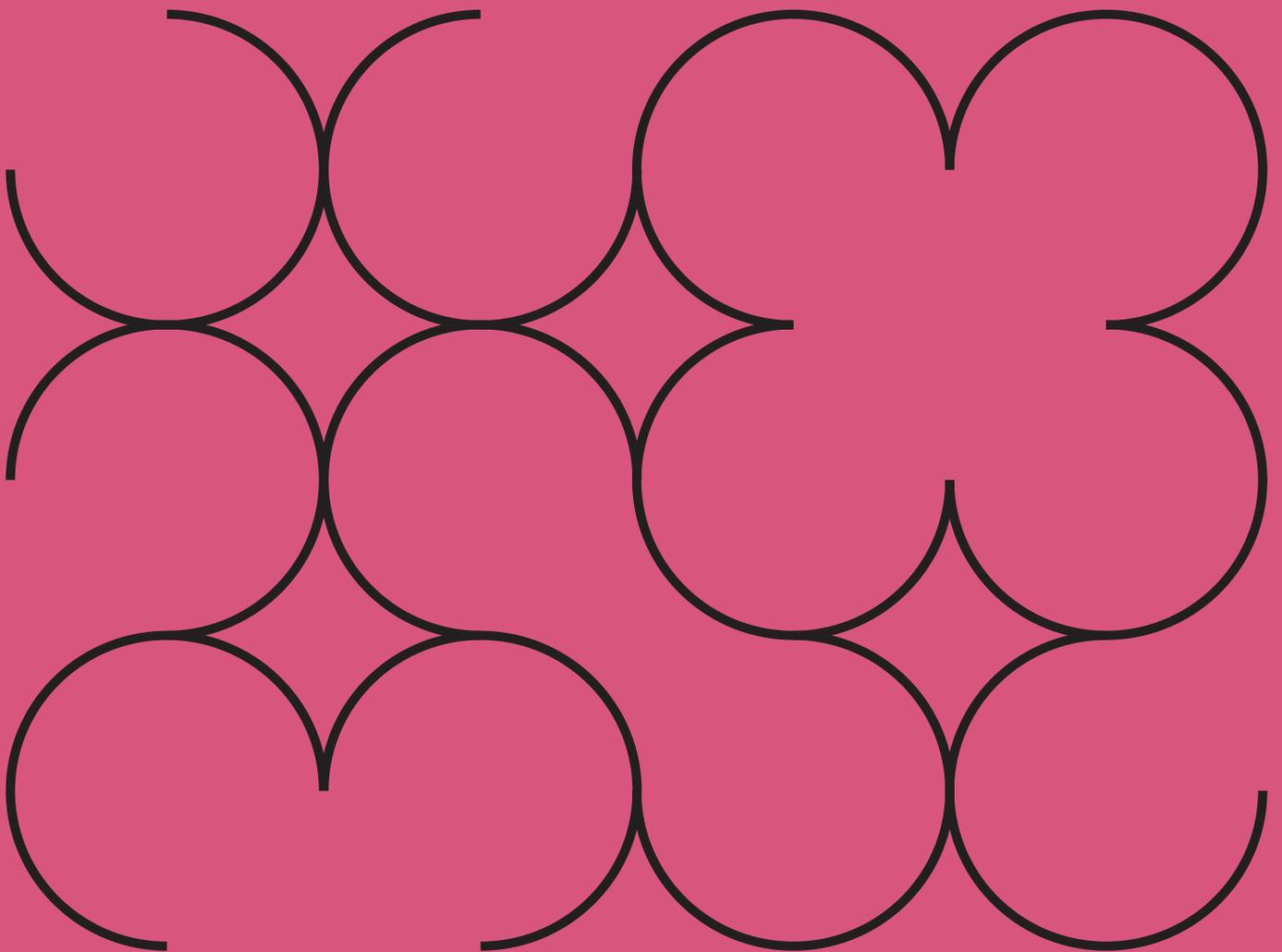


# Planning with Nature: How can Authorities develop and implement a green infrastructure strategy?



Public Practice is a not-for-profit social enterprise with a mission to improve the quality and equality of everyday places by building the public sector's capacity for proactive planning.

10% of the year-long placements is dedicated to a Research & Development programme to share new knowledge and practice across authorities. This Practice Note is one of the outputs of this programme.

# PLANNING WITH NATURE

## How can Authorities develop and implement a green infrastructure strategy?

This Practice Note is based on research carried out as part of a year-long placement as a Public Practice Associate within the Implementation team at Epping Forest District Council (EFDC), where the Associate's remit was to develop a Green Infrastructure (GI) Strategy for EFDC. The placement took place from April 2019 to March 2020 and was carried out in the context of an emerging Local Plan and in response to a need to mitigate recreational pressure on Epping Forest as a Special Area of Conservation (SAC). Whilst the research draws on the experience in-practice at EFDC, this Practice Note sets out recommendations that may be useful to other local authorities (Authorities) when making the case for a GI strategy, or developing one. Authorities are invited to help test, develop and improve the findings and recommendations put forward in this Practice Note.

### CONTEXT

Since the UK government declared a climate emergency in 2019, 65% of councils in the UK have declared a climate emergency.<sup>1</sup> Councils are now being challenged to deliver the fundamental changes this implies on the ground, requiring a shift in the way we plan the built and natural environment in order to meet ambitious targets and bring about a reduction in carbon emissions. The provision of high-quality parks and green open spaces has an important role to play in this respect.

SACs, along with Special Protection Areas (SPAs), are Natura 2000 sites, a European designation which protects natural habitats and species, with 338 sites in total across England - of which Epping Forest is one.<sup>2</sup> Alongside the ecological benefits of GI to biodiversity, there is an increasing body of empirical evidence that illustrates the value derived from ecosystem services – including air pollution removal, carbon storage and sequestration, stormwater runoff and mitigation of the urban heat island effect<sup>3</sup>, as well as the social value it delivers, including crime reduction, reduced loneliness as well as other mental and physical health benefits.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> [Declare a Climate Emergency, List of Councils. \(Feb. 2020\)](#)

<sup>2</sup> [European Commission, Natura 2000](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Treeconomics London, Valuing London's Urban Forest-Results of the London i-Tree Eco Project \(2015\)](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Fields In Trust, Revaluing Parks and Green Spaces. \(2018\)](#)

In addition, the monetary value of GI is now being calculated; in London, for example, £27 of value is derived from every £1 spent on GI maintenance.<sup>5</sup> Despite this powerful evidence, the maintenance of the nation's parks is chronically underfunded, resulting in a deterioration in their condition.<sup>6</sup> Understanding the significant value of GI allows Authorities to relate this potential value to policy agendas and to stakeholder requirements, allowing Authorities to develop more wide ranging and robust strategies. Crucially, the value put against GI can help shift the perception of green space as a maintenance liability to green space a multi-faceted and valuable asset. At its core, a GI strategy is about establishing the guiding principles for a pattern of decision making, and in turn, key projects should be used to illustrate this process and the benefits it brings.

## EPPING FOREST CONTEXT

The main objectives of developing a GI strategy for EFDC were to:

- Objectively analyse the GI layers in order to set out objectives for each and inform a district-wide approach to GI.
- Set out district-wide GI projects to be taken forwards, both by the Council and by communities with the support of the Council.
- In the context of significant development across the borough, outline a network of green spaces and routes which, through improved quality and accessibility, would encourage use of local green space and consequently reduce trips to Epping Forest SAC.
- Support the strong emphasis within the Local Plan on high-quality design and placemaking.

<sup>5</sup> [Greater London Authority, A Natural Capital Account for Public Green Space in London \(2017\) p.3](#)

<sup>6</sup> [Heritage Lottery Fund, The State of UK Public Parks. \(2016\)](#)

## FINDINGS

The EFDC GI strategy was developed in the very specific context of Epping Forest SAC and of significant development in the district. The process of developing the strategy and of providing specialist Landscape expertise input into applications revealed some key findings:

### 1. OVER-AMBITION

In hindsight, the GI strategy was too wide ranging, particularly in relation to the identification of projects, meaning its impact in relation to each objective was reduced.

### 2. OVERLAPPING THEMES

There are key overlaps between a GI strategy and an approach to play, open space, sustainable/active travel, healthy towns and sports/recreation. It is important to understand and ensure interconnection between these themes and their relevant strategies (if they exist) at the earliest possible opportunity.

### 3. VOLUME OF WORK ENTAILED

The work involved to arrive at costed actions should not be underestimated, as these can be the most important output of a GI strategy. The All London Green Grid sets out strong examples of how this can be done, however these need to be validated by both strategic analysis and meaningful community engagement.<sup>7</sup>

### 4. NEED FOR INDEPENDENT ADVICE

Design Review Panels bringing specialist, independent, multi-disciplinary expertise can be helpful in steering the development of a GI strategy.

### 5. FUNDING OF PROJECTS

Having a wider GI Strategy in place can give added weight to small, existing projects and so help them to secure funding.

### 6. COLLABORATIVE WORK

A multi-disciplinary approach from the outset is key to the success of any scheme. As a minimum, dedicated ecology and hydrology expertise to support the lead Landscape Architects should be included in any project team.

<sup>7</sup> [Greater London Authority, All London Green Grid](#)

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Lessons learned from developing a GI strategy for EFDC have informed a more general set of recommendations relating to key stages of the process identified as: making the case for, scoping, production, and implementation of a GI strategy:

### 1. MAKING THE CASE FOR A GI STRATEGY

#### — COORDINATE GI WITH POLITICAL AMBITION

A declaration of climate or biodiversity emergencies and other political ambitions – including carbon targets, tree planting and air quality commitments – can only be achieved through a coordinated approach to GI.

#### — INTEGRATE GI INTO PLAN-MAKING, PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT MANAGEMENT

A coordinated and integrated GI strategy can support the production of a Local Plan, can raise design quality and can make the planning process smoother (see PN017\_A).

#### — ENGAGE STATUTORY CONSULTEES

Natural England is a statutory consultee in both plan-making and development management, so its buy-in and involvement in project development and appraisal will aid a smooth planning process.

#### — DEMONSTRATE MONETARY VALUE OF GI

There are wide-ranging ecosystem services as well socio-economic benefits to be had from GI, from sequestering carbon to combating loneliness. Presenting these benefits as monetary value can secure wide-ranging support across Authority departments. GI can also be presented in relation to the Circular Economy principles so that success is measured in economic, environmental and social terms.

### 2. SCOPING THE DELIVERY OF A GI STRATEGY

#### — SET UP A GI STEERING GROUP

Establishment of a cross-cutting and high-level steering group is key to the success of a GI strategy. The primary audience of the GI strategy should be considered, which would ideally reflect the breadth of stakeholders who will benefit from GI. The steering group may include officers from Public Health, Flood Management, Planning, Ecology, Maintenance and Adult and Child Social Care teams amongst others. This helps ensure that the wide-ranging environmental and socio-economic benefits of GI are recognised across departments and can be reflected in the strategy.

- **CONSIDER FUNDING AND DELIVERY**  
Outputs should be considered from the outset as well as how any GI projects will be funded and delivered, drawing up a list of specific GI projects. These may be fundable through planning contributions, flood mitigation funding, sustainable travel or through other funding streams not traditionally associated with GI. Such funding streams may be identified by the cross-cutting steering group.
- **ESTABLISH CONTACT WITH ALL STAKEHOLDERS**  
Contacts with statutory bodies, external partners, community groups and neighbouring authorities should be established.
- **DECIDE ON STEWARDSHIP MODELS**  
Maintenance is key. The establishment of good maintenance practices through a stewardship model should be considered as an accompanying strand of work.

### 3. PRODUCTION OF A GI STRATEGY

- **RESOURCING**  
Consider whether the resources are available in-house for brief writing, clienting or production of documents. If expertise is not available, assistance should be sought from external consultants, ideally Landscape Architectural consultants with a strong design and GI strategy background.
- **ENGAGE THE STEERING GROUP**  
The steering group should be engaged in the development of a shared GI vision which the group can support and which they have been involved in shaping. Regular meetings and review with the Steering Group are essential to keep them in touch with developing proposals and to allow their input at the appropriate stages.
- **ENGAGE STAKEHOLDERS**  
Engagement is key. It should be frequent and challenging and should work across scales. For the GI to be successful, all stakeholders – from public bodies such as Natural England through to local communities – need to guide the objectives of the strategy and provide input into proposed projects.
- **A DESIGN FIRST APPROACH**  
Design has a key role to play, firstly in understanding the essence of a place and then in helping guide interventions which will complement, enhance and make visible that place. The strategy depends for its success on good design in implementation, therefore the appointment of consultants with a strong design background is key for delivery of successful projects.

- **ENSURE CLEAR COMMUNICATION**  
In order to be informative and engaging, the graphic quality of the GI strategy is important. Use of Adobe Creative Suite or similar will aid in this aim, helping to clarify expectations for all stakeholders and design teams.
- **DRAW ON INDEPENDENT EXPERT ADVICE**  
The advice of external design reviews panels that include appropriately experienced Landscape Architects should be sought from early stages for a project.

#### 4. IMPLEMENTATION OF A GI STRATEGY

- **UPSKILL OFFICERS**  
Training should be delivered to ensure an awareness of the role of the GI strategy across departments. Within the planning department, training of officers should ensure the consideration of developments of all scales.
- **KEEP TO SCHEDULE**  
The schedule for delivery of the strategy should remain live and up to date. This could be achieved through annual meetings with stakeholders and steering groups to ensure objectives and planned projects remain current.
- **SET TARGETS**  
Establish SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Timely) targets in relation to the objectives of the strategy. Targets should be regularly monitored.

## NEXT STEPS

This Practice Note has investigated the process of developing and implementing a GI Strategy and has suggested a series of recommendations for how Authorities can progress from making the case, to implementation of that strategy. To take these recommendations further, the following area would benefit from further development:

- Testing the recommendations and resource provided in other Authorities to understand how they may need to be adapted or refined through implementation.

Public Practice welcomes feedback on the findings and recommendations set out in this Practice Note to help update the resources and inform future research. Please contact us at [info@publicpractice.org.uk](mailto:info@publicpractice.org.uk).

## RESOURCES

An accompanying resource which officers can draw on to help make the case for a GI Strategy (see PN017\_A) is based on some of the justification used within EFDC for the production of a GI strategy. It should be noted that because of the impact of proposed development on the Epping Forest SAC (Natura 2000 site), the strategy was required in relation to the inspection of the emerging Local Plan, so limited material was needed to ensure buy-in.

The resource can be downloaded from [publicpractice.org.uk/resources](https://publicpractice.org.uk/resources).

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Our parks and green open spaces can have wide-ranging social, economic and environmental benefits, and the provision of high-quality green spaces has an important role to play in helping Authorities to meet their ambitious carbon reduction targets drawn up in response to the climate emergency.

There is an increasing body of evidence that illustrates the environmental value of ecosystem services as well as the social value that green open spaces can bring. With the possibility now of calculating a monetary value for green infrastructure, local authorities must shift their perception of green space from being a maintenance liability to being a valuable asset that can bring significant cost savings through the social, economic and environmental benefits it offers.

Provision and maintenance of high-quality green infrastructure depends on an Authority having a strategy in place. This Practice Note considers actions that officers can take to develop and implement a green infrastructure strategy. Drawing on research carried out during a year-long placement at Epping Forest District Council, it is accompanied by a resource that can support Authorities to make the case for green space.

#ClimateEmergency #ClimateAction #Sustainability  
#GreenInfrastructure #OpenSpace

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