

Building for nature

English Nature, the Government's adviser on wildlife and natural features. We believe the quality of England's natural heritage is fundamental to everyone's quality of life wherever they live and work.

Integrating social and economic growth with environmental protection and enhancement is challenging, particularly as England is one of the most densely populated countries with more than 350 people per square kilometre, with significant projected growth in households to 2021.

The challenge of managing the projected growth in households alongside the major geographical disparity in economic activity requires a strategic plan to ensure regeneration is delivered sustainably. The Sustainable Communities plan is the Government's response to this need. It is an ambitious, long-term plan putting sustainable development at the heart of initiatives to tackle both the provision of affordable homes and, elsewhere, the dereliction of empty properties.

English Nature welcomes the commitment to sustainable development in delivering homes in a high quality environment. But the true test of this commitment will be how it is realised.

Through its Living Places agenda, Government has acknowledged the importance of high quality open spaces in making places fit to live and attractive to investment. Biodiversity, the richness and variety of living things, is a test of the quality of such open spaces. It has proven benefits for human health and well-being and is an important element in defining a sense of place.

The success of the Sustainable Communities Plan will be measured by whether or not it delivers truly sustainable communities, in a high quality environment. The Green Grid

concept, formulated for the Thames Gateway, is such an approach. Its vision ensures new development provides a catalyst for achieving enhanced functional and physical linkages between a network of open spaces and to the wider countryside.

The Green Grid approach uses the existing suite of statutory nature conservation sites to provide a core framework upon which to develop an effective strategy for environmental improvements for the use and management of greenspace. There is huge potential to develop innovative habitat creation solutions to provide multifunctional greenspace which delivers functional services such as flood storage capacity, pollution amelioration as well as recreational and access opportunities.

As a benchmark for such provision, English Nature has defined Accessible Natural Greenspace Standards, endorsed by Government through policy planning guidance.

English Nature's Accessible Natural Greenspace Standards

- that no person should live more than 300m from their nearest area of natural greenspace of at least 2ha in size;
- provision of at least 1ha of Local Nature Reserve per 1,000 population;
- that there should be at least one accessible 20ha site within 2km from home;
- that there should be one accessible 100ha site within 5km;
- that there should be one accessible 500ha site within 10km.



James Farrell

Government has set a target of at least 60% of new development taking place on previously developed or 'brownfield' land. English Nature supports this principle and the protection of Green Belt to prevent unsustainable urban sprawl. However, in targeting brownfield land it is also important to recognise it may have value for wildlife, which can improve the quality of urban living.

Development should consider the biodiversity value of a site and aim to protect and enhance this interest. Sustainable construction techniques should be incorporated into these new communities. These range from green roofs, bat tiles and bird nest eaves to sustainable urban drainage systems.

The building of truly sustainable communities will be tested by whether designated sites are integrated in new developments and become recognised as key assets to the economic, social and environmental wealth of such communities. English Nature is committed to working towards such a vision.